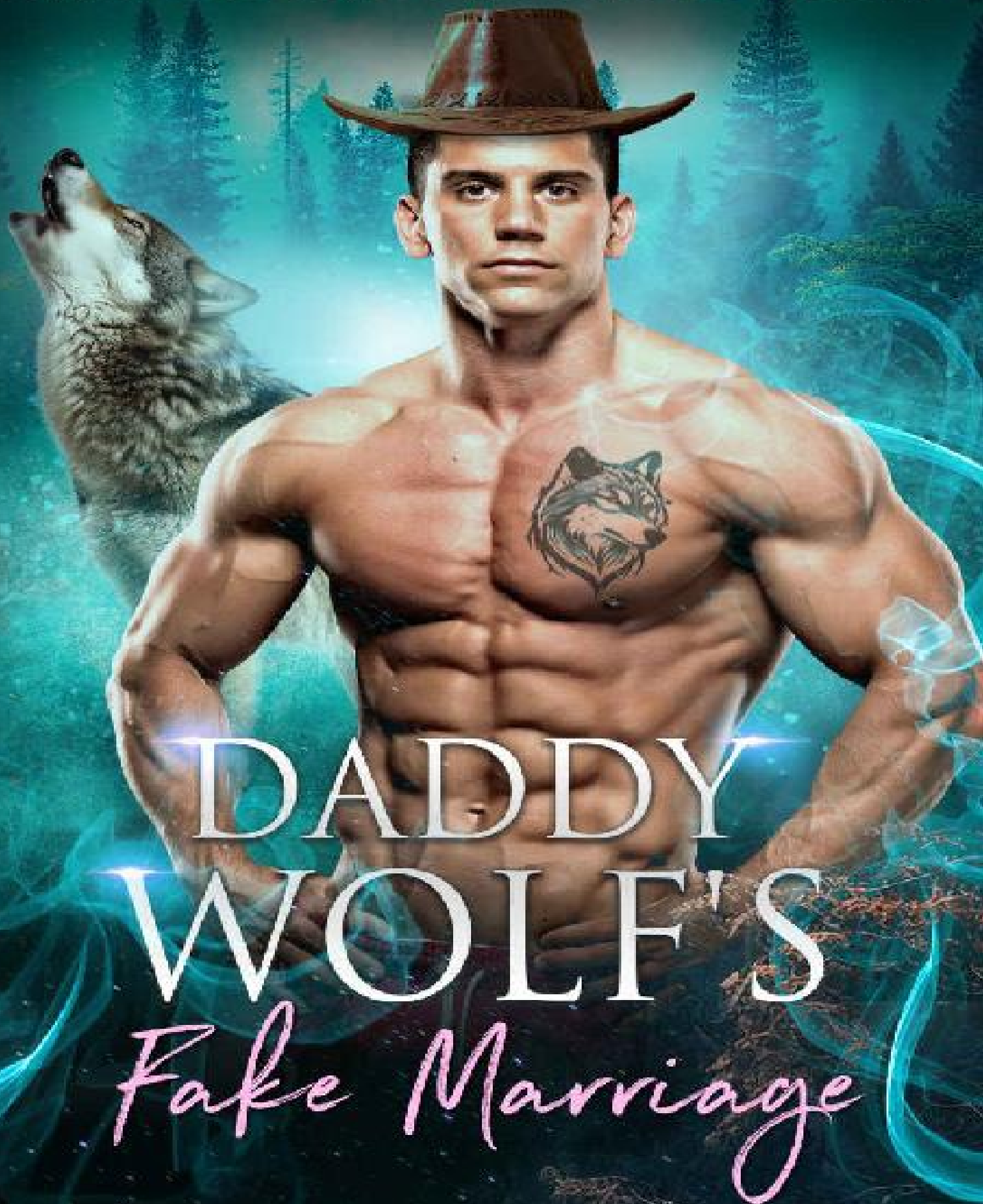


PROSPECT SHIFTER DADDY MATES



DADDY
WOLF'S

Fake Marriage

SERENA MEADOWS

DADDY WOLF'S FAKE MARRIAGE

(PROSPECT SHIFTER DADDY MATES)



SERENA MEADOWS

Copyright ©2023 by Serena Meadows - All rights reserved.

In no way is it legal to reproduce, duplicate, or transmit any part of this document in either electronic means or in printed format. Recording of this publication is strictly prohibited and any storage of this document is not allowed unless with written permission from the publisher. All rights reserved.

Respective authors own all copyrights not held by the publisher.

CONTENTS

[Chapter 1](#)
[Chapter 2](#)
[Chapter 3](#)
[Chapter 4](#)
[Chapter 5](#)
[Chapter 6](#)
[Chapter 7](#)
[Chapter 8](#)
[Chapter 9](#)
[Chapter 10](#)
[Chapter 11](#)
[Chapter 12](#)
[Chapter 13](#)
[Chapter 14](#)
[Chapter 15](#)
[Chapter 16](#)
[Chapter 17](#)
[Chapter 18](#)
[Chapter 19](#)
[Chapter 20](#)
[Chapter 21](#)
[Chapter 22](#)
[Chapter 23](#)
[Chapter 24](#)
[Epilogue](#)

CHAPTER 1



MITCHELL

The sun had just started its slow descent toward the mountains when the dark clouds began to roll in, bringing with them the scent of rain and the promise of an early sunset. Mitchell Stewart didn't care, though. In fact, he was thrilled with the change in the weather. Giving himself a few more minutes to enjoy the sight of the much-needed moisture headed their way, he went through his mental checklist once more, knowing that he was being obsessive but unable to help himself. So much was riding on the next few weeks, and he knew that preparation was the key to success. He'd spent countless hours making arrangements, hiring extra hands, and planning for the inevitable snags that would come his way.

The weather had been at the top of the list of things he couldn't control, but thanks to the storm rolling in, it was clear that the hot, dry spell they'd been enduring for the last few weeks was finally coming to an end. It would be hours yet before the rain reached them, but it was on its way, and he could look forward to a cozy night in his cabin listening to it patter on the roof. By morning the storm would have moved on, leaving the land cleansed and refreshed, and if they were lucky, the pattern would repeat itself until the grass was waist high again and the cattle were fat and healthy.

But luck alone wasn't enough. He couldn't let down his guard until the roundup and branding were done, couldn't allow himself to relax until the herds were up in the higher pastures grazing on the tender grass in the meadows. Getting to his feet, he followed the wide porch around the ranch house and walked into the kitchen, the scent of something delicious greeting him as usual. He paused for a second, his stomach growling, then took a few more steps inside, playing the game he always did, trying to guess what

wonderful meal was in store for him.

“I hope you remembered to wipe your feet,” Josie said without turning away from the stove. “If you leave muddy footprints on my floor, you’ll be mopping them up.”

“It hasn’t started raining yet,” he said. “What’s for dinner? It sure does smell good.”

Josie finally turned and looked over at him, “I made you pot roast; I know it’s your favorite,” she said. “But it won’t be ready for another hour, and I still have a pie to make, so stop bothering me.”

He leaned up against the counter, smiling as he watched her stir a pan of cherry filling, the bittersweet aroma making his mouth water. “And a cherry pie,” he said. “What have I done to earn all of this?”

“I just thought since you were going to be on your own for the next two weeks, I’d make sure you were well fed before I left,” she said, finally looking over at him. “I know the timing of this trip isn’t ideal, but I really have to go, it can’t be put off.”

“Josie, I told you it isn’t a problem,” he said, shaking his head. “I can take care of the house for a few weeks, and I won’t starve if I eat the bunkhouse cooking. Your family needs you. That’s way more important, so stop feeling guilty. We’ll survive without you, I promise.”

Josie let out a long sigh of relief, “I know that you’re right. Mr. Templeton told me to take as much time as I need, but.....” she paused. “Well, I can’t help but feel like I’m letting you down at one of the most important times of the year.”

“Tell you what,” he said, grinning at her. “You can make it up to me by coming on the fall roundup. You’ve been working here for three years and never gone on one, and I think it’s past time.”

“That’s not fair, you know how much I hate sleeping outside,” Josie said, shaking the spoon at him. “All that dirt and the bugs getting into everything, not to mention the other creatures skulking around. No thank you, I’ll stay right here and cheer you on from the comfort of the house.”

He shook his head, “How you ended up working on a cattle ranch I’ll never understand, but I’m sure glad that you did,” he said, laughing. “I’d better go do my evening rounds, and I’ve got to check on Talisman. I really hope he’s going to be ready to ride by the time we leave.”

“Don’t start anything with Connie, dinner is going to be ready in an hour,” Josie said, giving him one of her looks. “If you’re late, I’m going to

throw all this food out, including the pie.”

“You wouldn’t do that in a million years,” he said, leaning over and giving the older woman a kiss on the cheek. “But I promise I won’t be late.”

He found himself whistling as he walked out to the barn, the prospect of an excellent meal improving his mood, and he vowed that he wouldn’t lose his patience with Connie, even if she was a constant thorn in his side for one reason or another. He’d long ago acknowledged that it wasn’t completely her fault, she was only trying to do her job, but that didn’t change the fact that she managed to get under his skin like no other woman had ever been able to.

Forcing that thought out of his head when a tingle of desire made him shiver, he strode up to the barn, determined to keep their conversation brief. But when he stepped inside, the sight that greeted him made him freeze for a second as desire rippled through him, overriding his resistance thanks to a burst of magic. Taking a deep breath, reminding himself that Connie Delmonico wasn’t the kind of woman he wanted to get tangled up with, even if she was all long limbs and inviting curves, he cleared his throat, hoping to get her attention.

Connie

Connie approached Talisman slowly, wondering if his restlessness that night was mirroring her own or if his injury was bothering him again, and forced herself to put all her personal problems aside. Taking a deep breath, she reached out to the fiery stallion, cooing comforting words at him until the wild look in his eyes began to fade, then reached out to stroke him on the cheek. When she was sure that he’d calmed enough, she opened his stall door and led him out, tied his halter to the railing, then examined the wound on his leg with extreme care and an expert eye.

Satisfied that the animal wasn’t anxious because of the deep gash on his leg, she gave him the carrots stashed in her pocket one by one before leading him back into the stall and closing the door. Not ready to face the world outside the barn doors, she leaned over and scratched Talisman behind the ears, wishing that her life could be as simple as his.

“You’ve got it easy, boy,” she said, switching to the other ear. “You don’t have to worry about your mother blowing up your phone, no one tells you that you’re wasting your life, and you certainly aren’t expected to pop out a bunch of kids just to keep the family name alive.”

When the stallion didn't answer, she shook her head, "Look at me, talking to you like you understand," she said, realizing just how off balance her mother's last phone message had left her. "Either I need to call my mother back or get some human friends."

Only a second later, her phone began to buzz in her pocket, and she groaned, knowing exactly who it was by the ringtone, but ignored it just to be stubborn. She wasn't in the mood for one of her mother's lectures or an avalanche of gossip about her old friends. She didn't want to hear about the latest wedding, christening, or engagement. All she wanted to do was go back to her cabin, take a long shower, read the new book she'd just started in front of the fire, then crawl into bed and sleep until morning.

But when her phone started buzzing in her pocket again, she let out a long sigh, knowing that wasn't how her night was going to unfold. "Don't you think you should answer that?" a deep voice asked, making her jump. "It might be important."

Heart hammering in her chest, a burst of adrenaline rushing through her, she turned to find Mitchell leaning against the barn door, a pleased look on his face. "Mitchell, you scared me half to death," she said, putting her hand over her heart. "You shouldn't sneak up on people like that."

"There was no sneaking, I tried to make some noise, but you were....." his words died away when her phone started buzzing again. "Ignoring your phone."

She shot him a dirty look, "It's just my mother, it can wait," she said, giving Talisman one more good scratch before turning away. "I assume that you're here to do more than just annoy me."

"As a matter of fact, I was coming to see when Talisman will be ready to ride," he said, taking a few steps toward her. "Annoying you was just a bonus."

She gave him a dirty look but decided to let it go, "That was a pretty deep gash, he's going to need at least another week before he'll be ready to go back to work," she said. "I told you that the last time you asked, and nothing has changed since then."

"Connie, we leave for the roundup in three days, and I really need him," he said, an idea forming in his head. "What if we took him with us but don't work him until the week is up?"

"I don't know, Mitchell, he really needs to take it easy even after the injury is healed," she said. "I'm not sure that's a very good idea. We'd be

taking a huge risk with him, and you know how much this horse is worth.”

“How can I forget?” he asked. “I knew it was a bad idea to buy him when Mr. Templeton suggested it. We’re not a breeding ranch, we’re a cattle ranch, and I can’t have my working horses coddled and babied all the time.”

They’d been down this road before, “I’m not going to change my mind,” she said, shaking her head. “And just so we’re clear, I wouldn’t let you take any horse out in this condition, if you don’t want your animals coddled and babied, maybe you should make sure they don’t get hurt when they’re in your care.”

Knowing that she’d won that round, she pushed past him toward the door, “Now, if you’ll excuse me, it’s been a long day, and I’d like to go home,” she said. “As of right now, Talisman is staying here with me. If anything changes, I’ll let you know.”

She’d almost made it to the door when Mitchell’s voice broke the silence, “I could overrule you and take him anyway,” he said. “You don’t run this ranch, I do.”

Frozen in place, she gave herself a second to control the anger that surged through her, “Do that, and you’ll be looking for a new veterinarian,” she said, turning to face him, ignoring the way her heart began to pound for a different reason when she saw the heat in his eyes. “Don’t push me, Mitchell, that isn’t an empty threat.”

“Oh, I think it is, but I’m not going to push it,” he said, clearly backing down. “But I want that horse ready to ride when we get back next week.”

“Right, I’ll just use my magic wand and fix him,” she said, throwing her hands up in the air. “Oh, wait, I don’t have a magic wand, just my education and some common sense, both of which you seem to be lacking.”

She watched his face turning red and he opened his mouth, but before he could speak, he was interrupted by the wailing of a baby and the shrill cry of a woman. “Oh, can’t you ever shut up,” the woman shouted. “I can’t wait to get rid of you.”

Only a second later, a blonde came stomping through the barn door, a screaming baby in her arms, her eyes zeroed in on Mitchell. “I’ve been looking everywhere for you,” she spat at him, then shoved the baby into his arms. “Here, this is yours.”

CHAPTER 2



MITCHELL

It took several long seconds for Suzette's words to penetrate his brain through the wails of the squirming infant in his arms, but when they did, he staggered back a few steps, nearly dropping the baby. Feeling herself falling, the baby stopped screaming for a second, then began to cry harder when he grabbed her mid-air and crushed her to his chest. Her entire body was vibrating with the power of her cries, and he started to panic as Suzette turned and walked out of the barn.

Looking around, desperate for help, he saw Connie staring open mouthed at him, "I'm sorry, can you take her? This has to be a mistake," he said, holding the baby out. "I think she's going to explode or something."

Connie was backing away from him, shaking her head, "I don't know anything about babies, but I don't think she's going to explode," she said. "I think you should go after her mother though."

He looked over at the barn door, then down at the baby in his arms, but only made it a few steps before Suzette was back. "Here, you're going to need all of this," she said, dumping the load of baby stuff she'd been carrying onto the barn floor. "There's more in my car, but you'll have to come get it yourself."

Suzette turned and started to leave the barn again, "Wait, you can't just leave this baby with me," he said, finally able to find his voice. "That's abandonment or something like that. You could go to jail."

"That baby is yours, and the worst mistake I've ever made in my life. Well, except for getting involved with you," Suzette said. "Just try calling the cops on me, and I'll see to it that no one in this pathetic little town ever talks to you again, and then just to make sure you know how much I hate you, I'm

going to call your boss and tell him all about how you abandoned me when I was carrying your baby. We'll see just how fast he throws you out on your butt, and then you can kiss that ranch of yours goodbye."

He looked down at the baby then back up at Suzette, "She can't be mine," he said, shaking his head. "We broke up last year, it's not possible."

"Oh, she's yours," Suzette spat at him. "I didn't find out until a month after we broke up, I thought my new boyfriend would be fine with it, but she's a little monster. All she does is cry. And look at me, I'm all puffy and fat, I can't live like this anymore. I want my life back."

He could only stare, his mouth hanging open for a long time, "Can you prove it?" he asked, looking down at the screaming child again. "She doesn't even look like me, and you were cheating on me."

Suzette flashed him a dirty look, "I don't have to prove it," she said. "I'm done. What happens from here is up to you, do the DNA test if you want to be sure, but I'm telling you that she's yours. If you don't want her, put her up for adoption, I don't care, just keep me out of it."

She wheeled around and stomped out of the barn before he could stop her, "Suzette, wait, you can't do this," he said. "You're still her mother. You can't just abandon her; I don't know anything about babies. I can't take care of her."

"Then give her up for adoption," Suzette called over her shoulder. "I already signed the paperwork giving up my parental rights, that should make it nice and easy for you."

He wanted to chase after her, but the baby was still in his arms, "Here, give her to me," Connie said, holding out her arms. "You'd better not let her leave."

By the time he made it out of the barn, all that was left of Suzette was another pile of baby stuff and two tail lights growing dimmer in the darkness. Too shocked to move, he stood there as the first drops of rain began to fall, his brain unable to comprehend the full impact of what had just happened. But when the rain began to soak him, he looked down at the mess at his feet, then began to gather it all up before making a run for the barn.

The first thing he noticed when he made it back inside was the silence, and he stood staring at Connie, who was pacing back and forth, jiggling the baby on her shoulder, and singing something he couldn't quite hear. When she heard him, she turned to face him with a questioning look, and he shook his head, then let the bundle in his arms fall to the floor with the rest of the

stuff.

“What are we going to do?” he whispered. “Should we call someone?”

Connie eased the baby off her shoulder, “I don’t know what you’re going to do,” she said, handing the baby over to him. “But if I were you, I wouldn’t wake her up.”

“Wait, you can’t leave me alone with her,” he said. “I don’t know what to do, I might hurt her.”

“I don’t know anything about babies either,” Connie said, shaking her head. “I think you need someone with a little more experience, maybe Josie can help you.”

He looked outside, “It’s starting to rain,” he said, then looked down at the baby. “Will it hurt her to get wet?”

“Only if she gets cold,” she said. “You’d better make a run for it.”

Connie

Connie let herself into her cabin feeling a little guilty for abandoning Mitchell, but knew that Josie was much better suited to help him with the baby, so she pushed the feeling away. She’d done her best in the moment and managed to get the little girl to sleep. That was more than anyone should expect from her; she was a veterinarian, not a nanny, after all. Closing the door behind her, it occurred to her that there was something else she could do to help and pulled out her phone, fired off a quick message to one of the hired hands, then, satisfied that she’d done everything she could, she tried to put the whole incident out of her mind.

Flipping on the television for some background noise, she took a quick shower, put on her favorite pajamas, then went in search of something for dinner. As she dug through the refrigerator, she couldn’t help but wonder what was going on up at the ranch house, how Mitchell was coping with the baby, and again wondered if she was being selfish by not volunteering to help. Josie had invited her to dinner earlier that day, and she’d politely declined, the idea of spending an entire meal with Mitchell was a bit unnerving, even after all the time they’d worked together.

It wasn’t her attraction to him that made her uneasy, at least that’s what she told herself; it was simply the fact that she really didn’t like him or the way he pushed everyone around him a bit harder than he should, including the horses. She knew he was only trying to do his job just like she was, but

somehow that always seemed to result in them butting heads over one thing or another, which was becoming exhausting.

The problem was that she really liked her job and knew she couldn't have found a better opportunity, especially since she'd been fresh out of school when Mr. Templeton hired her. She didn't want to leave, didn't want to start over somewhere new. The ranch had become home to her, a place where she was respected, if not by Mitchell, then by the rest of the staff.

Prospect was a wonderful little town, and she'd made a few close friends in the two years she'd been there. She wasn't ready to give that up either, not over a man like Mitchell. Unable to believe that the man was making her think about leaving, she shook her head, a little smile turning up the corners of her mouth when she remembered the look on his face when the baby had been thrust into his arms. That's when she realized that Mitchell was going to be way too busy with the baby to bother her for a while, but to her surprise, instead of happiness, she felt a wave of disappointment.

Letting out a frustrated groan, she grabbed eggs, cheese, and the last of her fresh vegetables out of the refrigerator to make an omelet for dinner, wondering what was wrong with her. She wasn't looking for love, didn't want the whole family thing for a long time, if ever. She didn't mind being single and liked the freedom that it gave her. The sound of her phone buzzing on the table by the front door where she'd left it interrupted her thoughts, and she was relieved for a second until she realized that it was her mother.

With a sigh, she abandoned her dinner preparations to answer the phone, knowing that she couldn't avoid it any longer, "Hi, Mom," she chirped when the call connected. "I'm sorry I couldn't answer before, one of the horses got injured, and I was busy getting him fixed up."

"I've been trying to call you for days, Connie Lynn Delmonico, I know that you've been avoiding me, and I'm not happy about it, not one little bit," her mother snapped. "Your father and I raised you better than that, young lady; now apologize properly."

"I just said I was sorry, or did you miss that?" she asked, instantly on the defensive. "Let's not play these games, Mother, it's been a long day, and I'm tired."

"Oh, I see, sleep is more important than your mother. We haven't spoken in months, Connie," her mother said, trying to sound hurt. "I had hoped to catch up. I know nothing about your life and your father and I worry about you out there in that God forsaken place in the middle of nowhere, you know

that.”

She knew better than to fall for her mother’s false concern, “I’m sure you do, but I’m fine,” she said. “I like my job, I have some friends, and that’s about all there is to say.”

There was a short silence, then her mother sighed, “That doesn’t sound like much of a life to me. You’re missing so much living so far away,” she said. “Your father and I were thinking that it might be good for you to come home for a visit. You’ve been gone for so long; people are beginning to talk.”

“I could try and come home for a few days next winter,” she hedged, the idea of going home making her stomach start to ache. “Summer is our busy season around here. There’s no way I can get away right now.”

After another silence that she didn’t like, her mother said, “Connie, that wasn’t a request, your father and I expect you home for two weeks at the end of June. We’ve given you more than enough time to get this ranching thing out of your system, and it’s time you rejoined the family.”

“Mom, I’m not a rancher, I’m a veterinarian, and I’m not going to get it out of my system,” she said. “I’m sorry if that makes you unhappy, but this is the life I’ve chosen, and that’s not going to change. I’ll do my best to come home this winter, but that’s the best I can do.”

“I see,” her mother said, her voice dangerously devoid of emotion. “Is that your final decision?”

“I’m afraid it is,” she said. “I don’t understand why you can’t understand that I’m happy here.”

But her mother didn’t reply, and the line went dead, “Fine,” she said, telling herself that it didn’t hurt. “If that’s the way you want it, that’s how it will be.”

CHAPTER 3



*** MITCHELL ***

Mitchell stumbled through the back door, rain pouring off his clothes and making a big puddle on the floor, “I told you not to be late,” Josie called, coming out of the pantry. “I was giving five more minutes before.....”

Her words died away when she saw him and she rushed over to him, “Are you hurt?” she asked. “Why are you holding your arms that way?”

He shook his head, afraid that if he spoke, he would wake the baby, but used one hand to unzip his coat enough for Josie to peer inside. She gasped and jumped back as if he was carrying a nest of rattlesnakes, then looked up at him before looking back down at the baby again. A look of confusion appeared on her face, but she reached out one hand, pulled his coat back, and studied the baby closer.

“Where did she come from?” she finally asked. “Please tell me she wasn’t abandoned out there somewhere?”

He couldn’t answer right away, his brain still so overwhelmed he couldn’t string the words together or was afraid to say them out loud, he wasn’t sure which. After taking several deep breaths, he managed to find his voice, “Suzette just showed up here. She told me that the baby is mine and that she was done being a mother,” he managed to stammer. “She left a bunch of stuff then drove off, she’s gone, Josie, and she left the baby behind.”

Josie absorbed the news with another gasp, then studied him for a second before squaring her shoulders and becoming all business. “First, I think you’d better sit down,” she said, leading him over to a chair. “I’m going to make you a plate of food. I’ll take the baby while you eat, and when you’re finished, we can decide what to do.”

He sighed with relief, "Thank you, Josie," he said. "I have no idea what I'm doing."

"Well, lucky for you, I have lots of nieces and nephews," Josie said, flashing him a smile. "Just try to relax, that always helps with infants."

"Easy for you to say, you should have heard her screaming a little while ago," he said. "I was afraid she was going to explode or something."

"Oh, they'll do that," Josie said, heaping a plate with food. "Just not the way you're thinking."

He was scraping the last of the gravy off his plate with a slice of freshly baked bread when there was a knock at the back door and Tommy, one of the ranch hands, popped his head into the door. He waved him in, then wished he hadn't when he saw the young man's hands were filled with baby paraphernalia, and worse, another hand was coming in behind him with even more stuff.

"Dr. Connie asked us to bring this stuff up here," Tommy said, looking uncomfortable. "I don't know where it all came from, but it was piled up in the middle of the barn. Do you want us to take it somewhere else?"

"No, this is fine," he said. "You can just leave it right there. I'll take care of it later."

"Yes, sir," Tommy said, a look of confusion on his face. "If you don't mind me asking.....I mean, it's really none of my business.....but....."

Just then the baby woke up with a loud wail. He looked over at Josie, then back at Tommy, "I guess we might as well get this right out in the open, no sense in hiding it," he said with a sigh, running his hand nervously through his hair. "This might be my daughter. I didn't know about her until tonight. Her mother doesn't want her anymore and left her with me."

Tommy stared at him, his mouth hanging open, then shook his head, "Wow, I didn't think.....wow," he repeated. "I bet you're in shock. Is there anything I can do to help?"

"Thanks, Tommy, but I think we've got everything under control," he said, then hesitated. "I would appreciate it if you boys could keep this quiet until I can figure out what I'm going to do."

"You got it," Tommy said. "Are you sure you don't want me to put some of this stuff together? I'm pretty good at it, I've got little brothers and sisters."

The baby was still fussing, and Josie got to her feet, "I think the first thing we'd better do is find something for this little angel to eat," she said. "And

then we might want to see if there are any diapers in those bags, it won't be long before she needs to be changed too."

He looked at the heap of baby things, "Maybe I was a bit too hasty," he said, looking over at Tommy. "Maybe you can help me after all, because I have no idea what any of this stuff is."

Half an hour later there was stuff spread all over the kitchen, but the baby was sucking peacefully on a bottle, her little face scrunched up as her jaws worked, and he couldn't help but smile. "You're a natural," Josie said, looking over his shoulder. "When she's done eating, you'll have to burp her. She might spit up a little, but that's perfectly normal."

"Spitting up is normal?" he asked, making a face. "I don't know if I can do this."

"Wait until you change your first stinky diaper," Josie said, laughing. "You're in for a treat."

He looked down at the baby, "What if she's really mine?" he asked, unable to hide the fear and panic that suddenly overwhelmed him. "What am I going to do?"

"You're going to man up and do the right thing," Josie said, squeezing his shoulders. "If she's yours, Mitchell, you're going to nurture and protect her. You're going to love her with all your heart and make sure that she grows up to be an amazing young woman. You're going to be her father."

Connie

Drinking in the fresh air and sunshine, Connie followed the path through the trees to the ranch house, enjoying a world washed fresh by the rain, but couldn't help but wonder how the night had gone for Mitchell. She told herself that it was only normal that she'd wonder; after all, she'd witnessed the entire spectacle, but deep down, she knew it was more than that, she was worried about him. There was also a little guilt riding on her shoulders, she could have been more helpful, but the sight of him with a baby had thrown her so badly, escape had seemed like the only sensible solution.

The path she'd chosen led right by his cabin, but it was completely dark and silent as she walked past, forcing her to go on. She understood why when she opened the kitchen door and saw Mitchell asleep on the couch in front of the big fireplace with the baby on his chest. Looking around the room, she gasped at the huge mess, wondering if Josie had seen it yet, then saw the

older woman across the room sitting at the kitchen table, a shocked look on her face.

“Are you okay?” she asked after she’d threaded her way through the kitchen. “Do you want me to clean all this up?”

Josie waved her hand in the air, “Mitchell can clean it up when he wakes up,” she said, keeping her voice low. “I don’t think either of them got much sleep last night.”

“Are you still leaving today?” she asked.

“I have to, they need me back at home,” she said, shaking her head. “But I’ve already made a few phone calls. Mitchell won’t be doing this alone.”

“Is the baby really his?” she asked, then wished she hadn’t. “I’m sorry, it’s really none of my business, and I should be asking him, not you.”

“That’s okay,” Josie said, patting her hand. “I don’t blame you, and I don’t have the answer anyway. Right now, the only one who knows for sure is Gracie’s mother. I never did like that woman, she was only with Mitchell for his money, and as soon as she realized he wasn’t going to spend it all on her, she moved on.”

She didn’t know what to say, “So, it could be his,” she finally said, looking over at the sleeping pair. “You said Gracie, is that the baby’s name?”

Josie nodded, “We found her birth certificate, which names Mitchell as the father,” she said. “I shouldn’t be telling you all this, but I’ve already opened my mouth, and well.....you two.....oh you know.”

“Josie, we’ve been over this,” she said, narrowing her eyes at her friend. “There’s nothing between us, we barely even like each other, so I wish you’d stop bringing it up.”

“I’m just calling it like I see it,” Josie said, shaking her head. “After all, where there are sparks, there’s usually a fire.”

She rolled her eyes, “You did not just say that,” she said, laughing. “I promise you there are no sparks between us, you’re reading it all wrong, and I’m even less inclined since it looks like Mitchell is a father now.”

“You don’t want kids?” Jose asked, a look of surprise on her face. “You’re such a nurturing person, I just assumed.....”

“It’s not that I don’t want kids, I just don’t want them right now. There are so many things I want to do with my life besides just being a mother,” she said, feeling a bit defensive. “There’s an entire world out there that I want to explore, and you can’t do that if you’re tied down to a husband and kids.”

“I’m sorry, Connie, I guess I hit a nerve,” Josie said. “I didn’t mean to

upset you.”

“It’s not your fault,” she said with a sigh. “It’s just that I’ve had the idea of a husband and kids shoved down my throat my entire life, and no one will listen when I tell them that’s not what I want.”

“Then you have good reason to be annoyed with me,” Josie said, patting her hand again. “You should be allowed to live your life any way you want. Now, how about some coffee? Things are going to get crazy again when those two wakes up, so we’d better enjoy these last few minutes of quiet.”

“And I plan to be far away from here when that happens,” she said, grinning. “So, don’t be surprised if I suddenly run away.”

“Oh, I don’t think you’re that big of a chicken,” Josie said, shaking her head. “Besides, you won’t get any of my blueberry muffins if you don’t hang around.”

“Hey, that’s not fair, you know they’re my favorite,” she said, following Josie over to the stove and taking a deep breath. “They smell fantastic. I might just brave a crying baby for them.”

“I thought you might,” Josie said, pulling a tray out of the oven. “There might even be some bacon around here if you’re lucky.”

She’d finished her first muffin and was starting on the second when there was movement by the fireplace, and Mitchell let out a low groan, then opened his eyes. The baby opened her eyes and her face began to scrunch up as if she was going to cry, but the big tough cowboy who’d been fighting with Connie for years sat up and began to rock her, whispering in her ear until she let out a long sigh and settled back onto his shoulder. A wave of something she couldn’t describe rushed through her, and she felt a pull deep inside her loins that made her body begin to tingle and tighten.

Shocked, she jumped to her feet, but Josie put her hand on her arm and forced her back into the chair, “Just give them a few minutes,” she said. “I don’t think he even knows that we’re here.”

CHAPTER 4



MITCHELL

*H*ead still fuzzy with exhaustion, it took Mitchell a few minutes to realize that the sun was streaming through the kitchen windows, the birds were chirping in the trees, and a new day had begun. A vague sense that there was someplace he should be settled over him, but the sleeping baby in his arms seemed to have sucked any drive to move right out of him. It had been the longest night of his life as he navigated his way through bottles, dirty diapers, and enough baby spit up to last him a lifetime. He'd discovered that tiny buttons and snaps could be his enemy, burned his wrist on overheated milk twice, and for some reason his socks were missing, but they'd both survived.

The baby was warm against his chest and he realized with a start that his socks weren't the only thing missing, then remembered stripping his shirt off after one especially bad diaper change. Glancing down at the baby sleeping deeply, he wondered if he could risk setting her down long enough to visit the bathroom and splash some cold water on his face, and got slowly to his feet, groaning when his muscles protested. The baby stirred but didn't wake, so he crept over to the travel crib, set her down as gently as possible, and stepped back, holding his breath.

When it was clear that she wasn't going to wake up, he sighed with relief and let his shoulders relax, then turned to find Connie and Josie watching him from across the room. Josie had an amused smile on her face, but Connie was staring at him with a look in her eyes that made his stomach do something funny, and to his surprise, his magic began to come to life. Quickly looking away, he spotted his shirt hanging over a chair, grabbed it, and put it on, wrinkling his nose at the smell but feeling much less exposed.

“Well, it looks like you had a good night,” Josie said, getting to her feet. “How about some coffee?”

“Shhh.....you’ll wake her up,” he whispered, crossing the room. “You have no idea how hard it is to get her to sleep.”

“You were looking pretty cozy when I came in,” Connie said, a grin on her face. “I’m pretty sure I even heard you snoring.”

“Then you would be wrong,” he shot back. “I only got a few hours of sleep last night. If she wasn’t hungry, then her diaper was dirty. I don’t see why they can’t do everything at once.”

Josie laughed, then made a face, “You smell terrible,” she said. “I think you’d better take that coffee to go, you need a shower.”

“And what am I supposed to do with Gracie while I shower?” he asked, putting his hands on his hips. “I can’t take her into the shower with me.”

“I think Connie and I can handle her if she wakes up,” Josie said, handing him a steaming cup. “I’ll have some breakfast ready for you when you get back, you’re going to need your strength.”

That’s when it hit him, “Josie, you were supposed to have been gone already,” he said. “You’re going to miss your flight.”

“I put it back a few hours,” Josie said. “I couldn’t leave you two here alone, but we can talk more about that after you smell better.”

He looked over at the sleeping baby and realized it might be the only chance he had to have a few minutes to himself, “You’re the best, Josie. I promise I won’t be gone long,” he said, grabbing his boots, figuring the socks were a loss, then paused. “I have to get to work. I completely forgot, I’m sure they’re already missing me.”

“Relax, they’re not expecting you to come to work today,” Josie said. “I already called Peter and explained that you had some personal issues that needed your attention today.”

Back in his cabin, Mitchell showered in the hottest water he could stand, letting it wash over him, hoping that it would clear his mind, then got dressed and stood in the middle of his tiny living room. He tried to visualize the room filled with toys and baby stuff, which only threatened to bring on the panic attack he’d been flirting with since Suzette stormed into the barn the night before. Taking a deep breath, he pushed the anxiety away. He’d never turned his back on a challenge before, and he wasn’t going to this time either.

Whether she was his daughter or not, there was a child relying on him, and he wasn’t going to let her down, even if he was completely out of his

element. He'd handle this like he'd dealt with everything else in his life, one step at a time, and getting back to the ranch house was step one. But it still took him a few seconds to force his feet to move, a small part of him wanting to hide from the new responsibility that had suddenly been thrust upon him.

It was the thought of Josie having to deal with a screaming baby that finally got his feet moving, but it was clear that he'd been worried about nothing when he walked into the kitchen. Sitting in a rocking chair by the fireplace, Connie had the baby in her arms and was cooing softly to her, a tender smile on her face. Her long black hair had tumbled over her shoulder, and the baby had one long curl wrapped in her fist, her eyes roaming over Connie's face.

A hard stab of desire erupted deep inside him and spread like wildfire in a dry forest, awakening his magic, and he found himself stumbling back a couple of steps. Alarm bells going off in his head, he closed his eyes until the tingle of his magic began to fade, then took a deep breath. This wasn't the time, place, or woman to be having these feelings about, he told himself. It was just some weird reaction to spending the night caring for the baby, and nothing more. Opening his eyes, he took one more deep breath and walked into the kitchen, only then remembering the mess he still had to clean up.

Connie

Connie felt Mitchell's eyes on her before she looked up to find him coming across the room toward her, a tender smile on his face that made her heart pound just a bit faster. She knew the smile wasn't for her, but that did nothing to change the surge of attraction that shot through her, and she forced herself to look away, reminding herself that he wasn't for her. But when he came and stood right behind her, her body seemed to disagree and a thrill shot through her, making it hard to breathe for a second.

"Well, don't you two look cozy," Mitchell said, grinning down at her, his brown eyes twinkling with amusement. "I thought you told me that you don't know anything about babies."

"I don't, I'm just really good at faking it," she said, shrugging her shoulders, wishing he would step back. "To be completely honest, I usually do everything in my power to avoid them."

"Yet, here you are," he said, reaching down to stroke the baby's cheek. "What's different?"

Mitchell was so close she could smell the shampoo he'd used only a little while ago, the scent of soap underneath it, and something else that she understood somewhere deep inside her was simply him. Her body began to hum with desire, and a little gasp escaped from her parted lips, making him turn his head and look over at her. Suddenly face to face, their mouths only inches apart, neither moved as something began to stir between them and for a second, she was sure that he was going to kiss her. But then he straightened up with a little groan, quickly turned away from her, stomped over to the coffee pot, and poured himself a cup.

"I must be losing my mind," he muttered, then downed half the cup in one gulp. "It must be the lack of sleep."

Disappointment quickly turned to anger, but she held her tongue, realizing that she'd be giving too much away if she said anything, and she turned her attention back to the baby, determined to ignore Mitchell. Josie came bustling into the kitchen, her cell phone in one hand, a notebook in the other, and a smile spread across her face when she saw Mitchell.

"Well, you look much better," she said. "I've been busy while you were gone. Sit down and I'll make you some breakfast, we can go over everything while you eat. Then I have to be off, my flight leaves late this afternoon."

Thinking that was her opportunity to escape, she started to get to her feet, but the baby began to fuss, and she sat back down. Her face scrunched up, Gracie began to wail, and she looked over at Josie, not sure what to do, but the older woman had already pulled a bottle out of the warmer and popped it into her hand.

"Be a dear and give her that while Mitchell and I talk," she said, grinning down at her. "Don't worry, you can't do it wrong."

"Josie.....I....." she started to protest, but Gracie started to scream louder. "Oh, okay."

She slipped the bottle into the baby's mouth, instantly silencing her, and she let out a sigh of relief, "See, nothing to it," Josie said, grinning at her. "We won't be long."

"You owe me," she said. "I want at least a dozen blueberry muffins for this."

"If that's all it takes to get you to babysit, sign me up," Mitchell called from across the room.

"That wasn't an offer," she said, glaring at him.

After turning her attention back to Gracie, she let her mind drift, but

couldn't help overhearing the conversation going on across the room. "I'm sorry if I've overstepped here, Mitchell, but I can't bear the thought of leaving you here without anyone to help you through this," Josie said, setting the notebook down in front of him. "I wrote down some phone numbers of people I know you can trust, a woman from social services, a lawyer who specializes in family law, and the last page is a list of caregivers who will be happy to come out for a few hours, or even a full day. Hopefully this will give you a jump on getting everything sorted out, but I want you to remember that I'm only a phone call away. You have some big decisions to make, and I don't want you to think that you're alone in this."

There was a brief silence and she couldn't help but look over at him, "I just want what's best for the baby," he said. "Whether she's mine or not, she deserves to be part of a family that loves her."

"And these people will help you make sure that happens," Josie said, taking his hand. "Mitchell, I know this seems like the end of the world, like it's a bigger burden than you can handle, but I know you better than that. You're the most determined man that I know. Just like the ranch will be yours someday, you'll figure this out, and make the best choice for both of you."

"I hope so, Josie. I've never had another person's life in my hands, and it's a bit frightening if you want to know the truth," Mitchell said, his voice barely above a whisper. "I'm afraid I'm going to screw something up every second I'm with her. Does that ever go away?"

Josie laughed, "I'm sorry to tell you this, but I don't think so," she said. "Welcome to parenthood."

Mitchell groaned, and the baby chose that moment to let out a huge belch, "I think that's my cue to turn her over to someone else," she said, getting to her feet. "I'd rather not smell like baby puke all day."

"I'll take her," Mitchell said, getting to his feet. "This website I found last night said that it's good to walk with them after they eat, that it prevents gas. Another one recommended putting her on my knees and patting her on her back, I'm not sure which one to try first."

She and Josie both burst out laughing, "Well, Dad, I guess that's up to you," she said, handing off the baby. "Tell me how it works out."

CHAPTER 5



MITCHELL

Mitchell took one last look around the kitchen, pleased with the progress he'd made, then glanced over at the baby, who was sleeping soundly in the swing, and decided that he'd earned a break. After pouring himself a cup of coffee, he collapsed into a chair at the kitchen table and looked down at the list Josie had left him, not completely sure where to start. Suddenly becoming a parent was a little overwhelming, but he was already starting to adjust to the idea, which meant it was time to start making some decisions.

Looking down at the notebook, he realized that Josie had left him a path to follow, and he grabbed his cell phone. He'd just start at the top and work his way down. By late that afternoon, he'd worked his way through the list and set up appointments with a lawyer specializing in family law, several of the caregivers Josie had recommended, and spent a long time with Mr. Templeton on the phone explaining the situation.

His boss had been far more understanding than he'd expected, insisting that he do what was right for the baby even if it meant turning the roundup over to Peter, and suggested that they move into the ranch house until he could get the little cabin ready. The generosity had left him touched and grateful that he had such an understanding employer and even more determined to find a way to make the situation work for all of them.

Looking up at the clock, he decided he had time for one more phone call, and scheduled an appointment for the baby with the pediatrician Josie had recommended for the next day. Gracie seemed perfectly healthy to him, but he was far from an expert, and he was sure the doctor would have lots of helpful advice, something he needed in abundance right then. Satisfied that

he'd done all he could, he began to think about the night ahead, not without some anxiety, but took a deep breath and reminded himself they'd made it through the night before without anyone getting hurt.

He was just pulling a bottle out of the warmer, the baby fussing in his arms, when his phone began to ring, but he ignored his first instinct to answer it and gave the bottle to the baby instead. When he was finished, he pulled up his voicemail, a bit panicked to find a message from the lawyer that she had an opening in her schedule and would be coming that evening instead of the next morning. The clean kitchen had deteriorated over the course of the day, and he was suddenly exhausted, the lack of sleep suddenly descending on him like a weight.

Just then, there was a knock on the door, and to his surprise, Connie poked her head in, "I thought I'd come check on you two," she said, pushing the door open. "I brought you some dinner. I figured you probably didn't have time to cook."

He wasn't sure which was better, the sight of another adult or the smell coming from the covered dish in Connie's hands. "I don't think I've eaten anything since breakfast," he said, his stomach beginning to growl loudly. "And that smells fantastic, thank you, Connie, that was very kind of you."

"You might not say that after you've tried it, I'm not a very good cook," she said, bringing the dish over to the table. "I'll take the baby while you eat if you like."

"That would be great," he said, passing Gracie over to her. "She just ate and I changed her a little while ago, so she shouldn't be any trouble."

The baby immediately reached out for Connie's hair and grabbed a handful in her little fist, "Oh, I think we'll be just fine," she said, a smile on her face that made his heart skip a beat. "Take your time, we're just going to go over and sit in the rocking chair for a while."

When he took the cover off the dish, a wonderful scent began to fill the kitchen, "Connie, this smells wonderful, but there's a lot here. If you haven't eaten yet, you should join me," he said. "I'll never be able to finish all of this on my own."

"Oh.....I was going to eat when I got back home," she said. "I thought that you might need a break, so I figured I'd wait."

"Then I insist that you join me," he said, going over to the cabinet and pulling down two plates. "Gracie enjoys being in her swing, she can hang out in there while we eat."

Connie hesitated for a second, “Well, if you’re sure the baby will be okay,” she finally said. “I guess I could join you.”

After settling Gracie into the swing, Connie came over to the table, a wary look on her face, but took the plate that he offered her and sat down. They ate in silence, both concentrating on the food in front of them, aware that something had shifted in their relationship. For the first time he could remember, they weren’t arguing or fighting about something. Instead, they were sharing a meal and pretending there was nothing odd about the situation.

When they’d finished every bite of the casserole, he pushed his plate away with a satisfied sigh, “That was just what I needed,” he said. “Thanks again for thinking about me. We don’t always see eye to eye on things, so I really appreciate you going to all the trouble.”

Connie didn’t say anything at first, but he was sure there was a slight blush on her cheeks, “Just because I don’t always agree with you doesn’t mean that I can’t do something nice for you every now and then,” she said. “You could think of it as me helping Gracie out if that makes you feel better.”

He laughed, “I kind of liked it when I thought you were being nice to me,” he said, then shrugged his shoulders. “But I wouldn’t want to upset the delicate balance of our relationship.”

Connie laughed, and the sound made goosebumps break out on his skin, “No, we wouldn’t want that,” she said, shaking her head. “You might start expecting me to be nice to you all the time.”

“We definitely wouldn’t want that, life would be way too boring then,” he said, getting to his feet. “You cooked, so I’ll clean up.”

Connie

Connie wasn’t sure what to do with herself while Mitchell washed their plates and her casserole dish. She’d tried sitting at the table, but watching him was doing strange things to her insides. Getting up, she wandered over to the baby, but Gracie was sound asleep and the last thing she wanted to do was wake her, so she turned away and walked over to the window. Studying the stars that had just begun to brighten the night sky, she wondered what she was doing there, what had possessed her to bring him dinner and thereby crossing a boundary they’d been so careful not to cross before now.

Gracie was the obvious answer, but if she was completely honest with herself, she had been a bit worried about Mitchell, afraid that the stress of the situation was too much for him. She couldn't help but respect the fact that he seemed to have adapted quickly to Gracie's presence in his life, had managed to take care of her all by himself for the entire day. With a sigh, she realized that her feelings about him were changing, that it was becoming harder to resist the spark that flowed between them, and if she was smart, she'd get out of there as fast as she could.

Behind her, she could hear Mitchell finishing up and started to turn to tell him that she needed to go, but saw a pair of headlights coming down the driveway. "Are you expecting someone?" she asked, watching the car pull up to the house. "I should really go."

"Oh, no, I almost forgot, the lawyer Josie recommended is supposed to come out tonight," he said, looking around the room. "I was going to clean up some before she got here. I don't know how everything gets so dirty so quickly."

She laughed, "That happens when you have a baby," she said, then, against her better judgment, offered to help clean up.

"Oh, you don't have to do that," he said. "A little mess isn't going to hurt anyone."

"Okay then, maybe I'll just head on home, you don't need me hanging around," she said, starting for the door, but there was a knock before she could escape.

Mitchell hesitated for a second, "I don't mind you being here, I could use a little moral support," he finally said, then a little smile appeared on his face. "Even if it's coming from you."

"Well, if you want me to stay, I will," she said, hating the way her heart sped up when he smiled. "I just don't want to be in the way or something."

"You've been here from the very beginning," he said. "You might as well be here for the rest."

When Mitchell opened the door, all they could see was a big box with a picture of a car seat on it, but then a woman poked her head around the box and smiled at Mitchell. "Hi, I'm Penelope Garcia," she said. "I brought you a surprise."

Mitchell quickly took the box from her, "Oh, a car seat," he said. "I didn't even think of that. You're a life saver. How much do I owe you?"

"Consider it a baby gift," she said. "Of all the things you need, a car seat

is one of the most important, and this one will grow with the baby.”

“Thank you, Ms. Garcia,” Mitchell said, clearly a bit touched by the gesture. “Everyone has been so helpful since Gracie showed up, it’s a bit overwhelming.”

“Please call me Penelope, and I hope I can call you Mitchell,” she said, then looked around the room. “Oh, I’m sorry, I didn’t see you standing there.”

“This is our staff veterinarian, Connie Delmonico,” Mitchell said. “She was kind enough to bring me dinner tonight.”

“Well, it’s nice to meet you, Dr. Delmonico,” Penelope said. “It’s good to know that Mitchell has people supporting him right now.”

“Please call me Connie,” she said. “Would you like some coffee? I would be happy to make a fresh pot, and I’m sure there are some sweets hiding around here somewhere.”

“Oh, that would be lovely. We have a lot to discuss tonight. This is a highly unusual situation, and I think the sooner we know where we stand, the better,” Penelope said, then looked at the two of them. “I don’t want you to think I’m being nosy, and I want to assure you that anything we discuss here tonight is strictly confidential, but I just wonder if you two are.....together, I guess you could say.”

She managed to hold back a bark of laughter, but Mitchell wasn’t so successful, “No, we’re not involved, if that’s what you mean,” he said, shaking his head. “We’re just.....coworkers.....the truth is we don’t get along that well, but Gracie.....”

“I see,” Penelope said, cutting off his words. “That’s good enough for me, not that it would have been a problem if you were involved. I just like to know as much as I can about my clients and their situation.”

“I understand,” she said, feeling uncomfortable again. “I’ll get that coffee so you two can get started.”

It was a bit of a surprise to find that Mitchell's words stung a little. She'd been so sure that she wanted nothing to do with him, but there was a little cold spot in her middle that told her differently. Shaking it off, she started making coffee, planning to escape the first chance she got, all too aware that she didn't belong there, not as Mitchell's friend, not as his.....but she didn't let herself finish the thought, deciding it was much too dangerous. They'd long ago established the kind of relationship they were both comfortable with. The little spark between them was just that, a little spark and nothing

more.

CHAPTER 6



*** MITCHELL ***

While Penelope got settled at the table, he checked on the baby, “We should have about an hour before Gracie wakes up again,” he said, joining her. “She’ll be wet and hungry and not the least bit patient.”

Penelope laughed, “I see that you’re already figuring this parenting thing out,” she said, smiling at him. “Does that mean you’ve decided to keep her?”

“I don’t think I’ve ever considered anything else,” he said, looking over at the baby. “She’s my daughter and my responsibility.”

Penelope reached over and put her hand on his arm, “And if she isn’t?” she asked. “How would you feel then? Would that make a difference? I’m only asking because this is a big decision, Mitchell. We’re talking about a lifelong commitment here, so you might want to take some time to think about it. As your attorney, I would also recommend a DNA test. She might not be yours; you said so yourself when we spoke on the phone earlier today.”

“That’s true, but I was still a bit off balance when I talked to you earlier,” he said. “Now that I’ve had some time to think about it and spend some time with the baby, well.....I think she is mine.”

“So, no DNA test,” Penelope said, scratching it off her list. “That actually makes things very simple, all we have to do is file the paperwork the baby’s mother left giving up her rights as Gracie’s mother, and she’ll be completely yours.”

“That’s it?” he asked, sitting back in his chair. “I thought there would be more to it.”

“Well, you’re listed as the father on the birth certificate, so according to the state of Montana, that makes you her legal guardian if the mother isn’t in

the picture,” Penelope said. “That doesn’t mean you don’t still have some work ahead of you. You’ll have to get her added to your insurance, I’m sure you’ll need to arrange for some childcare, and a visit to the doctor might be a good idea.”

“I already have an appointment for tomorrow morning with a doctor that Josie recommended,” he said. “And now that you’ve brought me the car seat, something I didn’t even think about, so we should have no problem getting there.”

“If you need help with the insurance company, just give me a call. They can be a bit difficult about these things sometimes,” Penelope said. “And I have a few names of competent childcare providers if you want me to email them to you.”

“That would be great,” he said, finally beginning to feel like he was in control. “I can’t tell you how much better I feel, you’ve been a huge help.”

Just then Connie came over with the coffee and a plate of blueberry muffins, “Look what I found,” she said. “Now we can really celebrate.”

He laughed, “Right now all I want to do is go to bed,” he said, trying not to laugh when Connie’s cheeks started to turn pink. “And sleep for two days.”

“Oh, I’m sure that you’re tired,” she stammered. “You didn’t get much sleep last night.”

Amused, he was tempted to tease her, but noticed the way Penelope was looking at the two of them, “No, the baby kept me up most of the night,” he said, letting it go. “But I’m ready for her tonight; at least, that’s what I keep telling myself.”

They all laughed, but a loud knock on the door interrupted them, “I wonder who that could be?” Mitchell said, getting to his feet. “I wasn’t expecting anyone else.”

Connie was on her feet right behind him, “I hope nothing is wrong with the horses,” she said. “I told Max and Rob I’d be up here if they needed me. Talisman has been a bit of a baby about that leg.”

“Why didn’t you tell me that before?” he demanded, his voice too loud. “I hope this injury isn’t going to become a problem. You assured me he’d be good as new.”

“I didn’t tell you because there were other things going on, and it didn’t seem like big of a deal,” she shot back, almost relieved to have the old Mitchell back. “I would have told you before I left, so take a deep breath and

stop yelling at me. You'll wake the baby."

"I'm not yelling at you," he said, pulling the door open with more force than he intended. "I was just asking a question."

When Connie didn't answer, just stared at the open doorway. He turned around to find an older woman standing on the porch, her face scrunched up with displeasure. "Are you Mitchell Stewart?" she asked, but didn't wait for him to answer. "I'm Ophelia Crenshaw from Social Services, and I'm here to assess the situation in this home. I understand you have recently come into possession of an infant, a baby girl if I'm correct, and the state has grave concerns that said child is in danger if left with you."

For several long seconds he could only stare at the woman, too shocked to even form words, "What is this all about?" Penelope asked, pushing him out of the way. "Oh, Ophelia, I should have known it was you trying to stir up trouble again."

The woman let out a huff, "Penelope Garcia, you have no right to talk to me that way," she said. "I'm only doing what the state has entrusted me to do and seeing after the welfare of that poor child, she can't be allowed to stay in this.....home. I'm here to see that she's placed in an appropriate situation, and I have the law on my side."

"Oh, really, where's your escort?" Penelope asked, looking over the woman's shoulder. "Where's the court order?"

"I had hoped to avoid all that commotion, for the baby's sake, of course," the woman said, then looked him up and down. "I can't imagine a man like you would want her anyway. Surely, the last thing you want is to be a single father, Mr. Stewart. If you give me the baby now, we can keep this simple. If I have to go through legal channels, it will get messy, and none of us wants that."

Connie

Connie had seen Mitchell angry plenty of times in the years that they'd known each other. That anger had even been directed at her some of those times, and a few of them, she'd even deserved it. But now she realized with a jolt that she'd never seen him furious. Every muscle in his body was rigid, he'd clamped his teeth tightly together, and was clearly taking deep breaths to keep from exploding as he clenched and unclenched his fists. It must have taken a colossal effort on his part not to scream at the woman, and she found

herself wanting to defend him before shoving the horrible woman out the door.

“What we want, Ms. Crenshaw, is for you to take your threats and get out of this house,” Mitchell said, his voice dangerously low. “You’re insane if you think I’m going to hand my daughter over to a woman like you. I know who you are, and I’m pretty sure you’ve come here on your own, so get off this land and don’t come back without something to back you up.”

“How dare you? You’re nothing but a dirty cowboy; you shouldn’t even be talking to a woman like me,” Ms. Crenshaw sneered at him. “You are certainly not a suitable parent for that baby, and everyone knows that a child is best with two parents. All it will take is one word from me, and the judge will grant the state custody.”

“Actually, you’re wrong, Ophelia,” Penelope interrupted. “The most recent studies in the Journal of Pediatric Medicine say that as long as a child has a stable environment with strong connections to the adults in their lives, a single-family home can be very nurturing.”

“A man alone cannot raise a child, especially one like him,” Ms. Crenshaw said, crossing her arms over her chest. “I know all about him, his dirty secret, and I’ll use it if I have to, expose the truth to everyone in town.”

Penelope looked over at Mitchell, her eyebrows raised, “I wouldn’t do that if I were you,” Mitchell said. “I’m not the only one who has secrets, I’d hate to have to tarnish that perfect reputation of yours. I can’t imagine the state would be too happy to discover you’ve been using your power to harass an innocent citizen.”

Ms. Crenshaw dropped her arms to her sides, “You wouldn’t dare,” she hissed. “Besides, no one would listen to you.”

“Are you sure of that?” he asked, taking a step toward her. “Now might be a good time for you to leave.”

“This isn’t over, I’m going to be watching you,” Ms. Crenshaw said, her face turning red with anger. “A single man isn’t a proper guardian for a child, especially one like you. Trust me, you can’t do this alone, and when you screw up, I’m going to be right there. You’re going to fail, Mitchell Stewart, I’m going to see to it that you do, and when it happens, I’m going to enjoy every minute of it.”

By the time the woman had stopped speaking, Connie was seething with anger and couldn’t hold her tongue any longer. “For your information, Mitchell is not alone, he has plenty of people around him who will be willing

to help, and that includes me,” she said, narrowing her eyes at the woman. “I’d also like to remind you that you’re talking about an innocent child. Your behavior is disgusting and completely unprofessional, Ms. Crenshaw. You should be ashamed of yourself; you’re not an advocate for children, you’re a mean old woman who should mind her own business.”

Ms. Crenshaw’s mouth popped open, her face full of surprise, and bright red spots appeared on her cheeks. “Mr. Stewart, you’d better control your.....woman before she makes this worse than it already is,” she spat. “I don’t know who you think you are, missy, but no one, especially a nothing like you, talks to me that way. You’re going to be sorry, too. I’ll have you run out of this town. We don’t appreciate people like you ruining our good name around here.”

“You’re the only one giving this town a bad name,” Mitchell said, shaking his head. “I’ve asked you nicely to get off my property, and I won’t be so kind the next time. So, take my advice, get back in your car, and drive away before I lose my patience.”

“You’re going to be sorry, you’re going to regret this,” Ms. Crenshaw stammered. “I’m going to call your boss, that’s what I’m going to do. I’m going to tell him all about this, then we’ll see how smart you all are. You’re going to be out of a job and homeless. We’ll see how well you can take care of a baby then.”

“When you talk to Mr. Templeton, make sure you tell him that Dr. Delmonico says hi,” she said, a fake smile on her face. “Actually, never mind, maybe I’ll give him a call myself and let him know that the entire staff here at the ranch is behind Mitchell. There are many different versions of family. We may not be the traditional version around here, but we have each other’s backs. If Mitchell and the baby need anything, we’ll be here to help him.”

“And as his lawyer, I’ll be filing a complaint with the state board,” Penelope said, pushing her way past them both to get right in the woman’s face. “And from now on, any contact you have with Mr. Stewart had better come through me, or there will be consequences.”

“You can’t tell me what to do, Penelope Garcia. I knew you were trouble when you came to this town,” Ms. Crenshaw said. “I’ll be speaking to Judge McIntyre about you first thing tomorrow morning.”

“Well, then you’d better get up really early since he and I are having breakfast together tomorrow,” Penelope said, clearly enjoying herself. “It

might be a bit embarrassing for you if we were together when you called.”

The woman’s mouth popped open but nothing came out except a strangled cry of frustration. Then she turned and stomped away, muttering more threats under her breath. Mitchell closed the door slowly, then turned to face them, his face filled with a mix of shock and anger, then he began to laugh. Still angry, she could only stare at him, her heart pounding, but after a few seconds, she began to giggle, then she was laughing too.

CHAPTER 7



*** MITCHELL ***

Mitchell couldn't stop laughing; the absurdity of his situation was almost more than he could handle and stay sane, but he knew even though Connie and Penelope were laughing with him, he had to get himself under control. Taking a deep breath, he turned away from the door and looked at the two women who had backed him up, knowing that they deserved an explanation, but dreading exposing so much of his past. It didn't help that he couldn't tell them the entire truth, that he'd have to skirt around a few facts that would only lead to questions he didn't want to answer.

"Well, that was fun," he finally said, shaking his head. "I know you must think that I've lost my mind, laughing like that, but that was.....well.....I suppose I should explain."

"That might be nice," Penelope said, leading him over to the table and shoving him into a chair. "How do you know Ophelia? And what's this big secret she knows about you?"

The baby began to fuss, and he started to get to his feet, "I've got her," Connie said. "You stay where you are. I think you need a few minutes to gather yourself, and I don't blame you, that woman was horrible."

"You're telling me," he said, sitting back in his chair. "She was awful when I knew her seven years ago, and clearly nothing has improved since then. Her name wasn't Ophelia Crenshaw back then, she must have changed it."

"Now this is getting interesting, a twist in this case that I didn't see coming. I want to hear all about it," Penelope said, grabbing the coffee pot and bringing it over to the table. "And don't you dare leave anything out, I've been trying to find a way to put that woman in her place, and this might just

be it.”

“I’m not looking to start a fight with her,” he said. “I just want her to leave me alone.”

“I won’t do anything you don’t want me to, but you should know that you’re not the only one this woman has harassed,” Penelope said. “She gets away with it because Judge McIntyre likes her. Why, I have no idea, but this time she screwed up if this is personal and we can prove it.”

He hesitated, “Maybe I should go,” Connie said from the other side of the room, where she was changing the baby. “This sounds like something private; it might be easier to talk if I’m not here.”

“No, that’s okay, it’s not a big secret, just a bit embarrassing,” he said. “I’ve only been seriously involved with two women in my life, and I was married to the first one.”

Connie brought the baby over and joined them at the table, propping Gracie up in her lap so she could look around the room. “We’re not talking about Gracie’s mother, are we?” she asked. “You said all of this happened seven years ago?”

He nodded his head, “I’d just turned nineteen and gotten my first promotion to wrangler when I met Darlene,” he said. “I was young and stupid, got wrapped up with her way too fast, and before I knew it, she was telling me that she was pregnant. Getting married was her idea, but it didn’t seem like I had any choice. She was going to be the mother of my child, so I agreed, and only three days later we were standing in front of a justice of the peace.”

Connie and Penelope exchanged a look he understood all too clearly, “Yeah, I said I was stupid back then,” he said with a sigh. “It was two months before I began to suspect that Darlene had lied. The clues had begun to build up, so I started following her when she left the house. One night she went to her mother’s house, and I listened to them through an open window. Darlene not only admitted what she’d done out loud, it was obvious her mother was in on it. Her mother was Ophelia Crenshaw.”

“Oh, Mitchell, that’s a horrible thing for a woman to do,” Connie said. “And the oldest trick in the book.”

“Well, I was young and stupid, but not that stupid,” he said. “I went straight home, packed up everything I owned, and left her. The next morning, I found a lawyer and filed for divorce. It got ugly pretty quickly after that. Darlene and her mother stalked me, showing up at the ranch where I was

working and following me any time I went to town. They tried to make me out to be the bad guy, and spread a bunch of rumors about me all over town. In the end, I decided the best thing I could do was move, so I came here.”

There was a long silence filled only with the cooing of the baby, “Well, that makes this attack on you personal, then,” Penelope finally said. “I can use this to force her to back off if you’ll let me. You didn’t do anything wrong, Mitchell. You were the victim, you have nothing to be embarrassed about, we all make mistakes.”

“The last thing I need is this woman breathing down my neck, so do what you have to,” he said. “I don’t know what this is going to cost, so we might have to make some arrangements. I’ve suddenly acquired a lot of expenses.”

“But they are very cute expenses,” Penelope said, looking over at Gracie. “And there won’t be a bill. This one is on me. I’ve been waiting for this chance for years.”

“So, what’s the next step?” he asked. “I’m not sure what to do now.”

“That’s simple,” Penelope said. “You get on with your life, take care of Gracie, and figure out how to do your job at the same time. I’ll take care of Ms. Crenshaw,” Penelope said, then looked over at Connie. “I hope you meant it when you said the people on this ranch are like family, because Mitchell is going to need you all for the next few weeks.”

Connie

Connie stumbled out of the house an hour later, wondering how she’d gotten herself so involved in Mitchell’s problems, with a list in her hands of the times she’d volunteered to look after Gracie. She didn’t have to think about it for long and let out a long sigh before shoving the paper into her pocket, willing herself to forget the adorable little girl and her frustrating father for the rest of the night.

After a quick walk through the barn, she went to her cabin, took a hot shower, then flopped down on the couch, turned on the television, and began looking for something to watch. It didn’t take her long to figure out that nothing was going to hold her interest, that forcing Mitchell out of her mind hadn’t worked, and she let out a frustrated sigh, unable to stop herself from imagining what he was doing right then.

Jumping up from the couch, she grabbed a book off the shelf but set it down only a few minutes later when she’d found herself reading the same

page over and over, then got up from the couch again in frustration. Slipping on a sweater, she went outside, curled up in the rocking chair on the front porch, and stared at the sky, hoping some fresh air would help. She decided it was time to talk with herself while looking up at the stars. She was a grown woman, an educated woman, she had goals for her life, and right then they didn't include a man or a baby.

She had to get the attraction to Mitchell under control, had to remember that technically he was her boss. Anything that happened between them would be a mistake and probably end badly. It was already hard enough to work with him, getting involved would only make that more complicated, especially if it didn't work out, she told herself while trying not to listen to the little voice asking what if it did work out.

When the voice wouldn't go away, she let herself imagine for just a second how it would feel to be held in his strong arms, the way his body would feel against hers if he kissed her, but quickly shoved the thought away when her body responded by beginning to tingle and tighten. Wishing everything didn't have to be so complicated, that she was the kind of woman to be content with a husband and children, she got up from the rocking chair and went back inside.

She wasn't ready to sacrifice her dream of opening up her own clinic, not for a man like Mitchell who didn't respect her or how hard she'd worked to get where she was, and she definitely wasn't ready to become a mother. Just the thought was enough to cool the desire she'd stirred to life only a few minutes before, and she climbed into bed, feeling much calmer about the whole situation. Nothing had changed. She was still attracted to Mitchell but he was still off limits, maybe even a little more now that Gracie was part of his life. She'd just go on like she'd been doing for the last few years, ignoring the feelings and doing her job.

Snuggling down under the covers, she let herself imagine the clinic she would build with the money from her trust fund, her favorite way to lull herself to sleep, and before long, she was sound asleep. But only a few hours later, she was awakened abruptly by someone banging on the door and she jumped out of bed, not bothering with her robe. She could hear the baby crying before she opened the door and braced herself, but wasn't prepared for the sight of Mitchell standing on her front porch.

He was wearing only a pair of pajama pants, his bare chest covered with goosebumps from the night air, but it was the look in his eyes that bothered

her the most. “She won’t stop crying no matter what I do,” he finally said, his voice cracking. “I’ve tried walking with her, I’ve tried putting her on her stomach and rubbing her back, I even tried giving her a warm bath, I’m out of options, and.....”

“Let me have her,” she said, holding out her arms. “You look like you need a break.”

“I don’t know if I can do this,” Mitchell said, handing over the whimpering baby. “I’m a terrible father. Maybe she would be better off with someone else.”

She put Gracie up on her shoulder, noticing instantly that the child was tensed up and trying to curl into a ball. “You’re doing just fine,” she said. “Go into the living room and lay down on the couch, I think Gracie has a stomach ache, and I might have just the thing to help her.”

After a quick check on the internet, she mixed up the old remedy her mother had always used when they were sick, then sat down in a chair and dribbled it into the baby's mouth. Thanks to a hefty dollop of sugar that she’d added, the baby swallowed it down willingly, her lips smacking and her face scrunched up with pleasure, and let out a huge burp only a few minutes later. Putting the baby up on her shoulder, she walked around the room, patting her on the back until the last of the gas from her stomach had made its way out, then carried her into the living room.

Mitchell was sprawled out on the couch, and for a moment she thought that he’d fallen asleep and wasn’t sure what to do with the baby, but then he opened one eye. “I’m so glad that you got her to stop crying. I don’t even care what you did,” he said, forcing himself into a sitting position. “Give me just a second, and we’ll go home.”

“Why don’t you rest for a few more minutes,” she said, sitting down next to him. “Gracie and I can keep each other company for a little while.”

“Just ten minutes,” he said. “That’s all I need.”

“I think I can give you more than that,” she said, then looked over at him and realized that he was already asleep. She smiled, then looked down at the baby. “It looks like you’ve worn your dad out. Let’s let him sleep for a little while.”

CHAPTER 8



MITCHELL

*B*right rays of sunlight woke Mitchell the next morning, but the pull of sleep was so strong that he couldn't open his eyes at first, and it took him a few minutes to become fully aware. The first thing he noticed was the feeling of warm soft skin against his, then a weight on his body that could only be described as female, and he opened his eyes just a little to find Connie sprawled across him. For a moment he started to panic, then saw the baby across the room on a pile of blankets on the floor and relaxed again, trying to remember how they'd gotten there.

It came back to him in bits and pieces but didn't explain why they were tangled together on Connie's couch, more bare skin between them than clothing. When she began to stir in her sleep with a little moan, and he had to grit his teeth as his body began to come to life. No matter how Connie had ended up on top of him, no matter how little she was wearing, he couldn't let her wake up with him.....

With a curse, he realized it was too late, and closed his eyes, trying to ignore the way she smelled, the way she felt sprawled on top of him. Only a second later, she lifted her head and looked down at him sleepily, then her eyes widened in shock and she quickly scrambled away from him. Her legs got tangled with his when she tried to stand, and she ended up falling back on top of him, her chest pressed against his, their mouths only inches apart. The urge to kiss her erupted inside him, and he reached for her, threaded his fingers through her curls, and pulled her head down to his.

He didn't give her a chance to pull away, took advantage of her surprise and slipped his tongue into her mouth when she gasped, instantly lost to the surge of pleasure that rushed through him. Connie relaxed in his arms, and he

deepened the kiss, his hands roaming over her body, the thin nightgown silky to the touch, then flipped her onto her back on the couch and looked down at her.

“Mitchell, this is a terrible idea,” she said, pushing against his chest. “Let me go before we do something we’ll both be sorry for later.”

“I can assure you I wouldn’t be sorry, not the least bit sorry,” he said, but let her slide out from underneath him, a little rattled by the depth of what he’d felt. “You can’t blame me; after all, a man can only resist so much temptation.”

Connie took a few steps away from him, and looked over at the baby, who was still sleeping, “I was not trying to tempt you,” she said, putting her hands on her hips. “I was waiting for Gracie to fall asleep and I must have dozed off. It was an accident; I wasn’t trying to come onto you.”

He wondered if she knew that the sun was shining right through the fabric of her nightgown, or that her nipples were hard little peaks tempting him to suck them into his mouth. As shocked himself as Connie would have been had she known what he was thinking, he let himself enjoy the view for a few more seconds, before slowly getting up from the couch.

“That’s too bad,” he said, letting his eyes roam over her body one more time. “Because if you had been it was definitely working.”

Connie gasped, then looked down at herself, her cheeks turning pink, “Oh.....I should go put my robe on,” she stammered, backing away a few steps. “I didn’t realize.....I wasn’t wearing it.....”

She turned and fled to the back of the cabin, and his laughter woke the baby, who began to gurgle on her makeshift bed on the floor. “Well, good morning, little lady,” he said, scooping her up in his arms. “It looks like things just got a little more interesting around here.”

When Connie came back, a long heavy robe belted around her middle, she gave him a dirty look, “We’re going to pretend that never happened,” she said, narrowing her eyes at him. “And we’re going to make sure it never happens again.”

He shrugged his shoulders, “You can pretend all you want to, but I promise you I’ll never forget that kiss,” he said. “And I definitely can’t promise that it won’t happen again.”

She opened her mouth, then closed it again, and marched past him into the kitchen, “I’m making coffee,” she said. “I would ask you to stay, but I’m sure that baby is going to be hungry soon. You might want to consider

changing her formula. I don't think it agrees with her."

He followed her into the kitchen, "Wait, what do you mean?" he asked. "How do you know that?"

"She had a stomach ache last night," she said. "That's a sure sign it's not agreeing with her. You should talk with the doctor about it when you go today."

"Oh, no, what time is it?" he asked. "We're supposed to be there at eight."

"Well, then you've got an hour to get home, feed Gracie, and get the two of you ready," Connie said, a little smile on her face. "That should be a fun challenge for you."

He looked at the clock one more time, "I bet I can do it," he said, grinning at her. "You owe me a kiss if I do."

"Hey, I never agreed to that," Connie said, but he was already moving toward the door. "Mitchell, did you hear me? That's not a deal, you can't kiss me again, I told you....."

The door closed behind him, cutting off the rest of her words, and he was smiling as he walked back to the house. All in all, he couldn't complain about the way his morning had gone, and he was looking forward to what the day might bring. Looking down at the baby, he knew it was going to be another day of firsts for them both, but he was feeling more confident, and the baby seemed okay after their rough night. Kissing Connie had been an unexpected bonus, one that he wasn't going to forget any time soon.

Connie

Connie worked through her morning rounds of the sick and injured animals in the barn, but her mind was still spinning from her encounter with Mitchell earlier that morning. She wanted to be angry with him, wanted to feel that he'd crossed a boundary he shouldn't have, but she couldn't quite get there. After all, she had been sprawled across him wearing almost nothing. Her cheeks burned at the memory, but under the embarrassment, there was a thrill of excitement and a tingle of anticipation at the thought that he wanted to kiss her again and hadn't been afraid to tell her so.

It both confused and scared her, and made her wonder if she was strong enough to resist him if he decided to keep pushing, or if she even wanted to. Alarmed at the path her mind was taking, she sat down at her desk and pulled

the stack of patient files in front of her, determined to keep her focus where it should be, on her job. It took her twice as long as normal to make her notes in the files, and by the time she was done, she was ready to escape from the ranch for a few hours.

After a quick trip back to her cabin for her purse and keys, she drove into town, found a spot to park on Main Street, and went into the salon where her best friend worked. “Connie, what a surprise, you’re the last person I expected to see,” Tammy said, coming out from behind the front desk. “We’ve been hearing a lot of crazy rumors around here. I was going to call you today to see if any of them were true.”

“Oh, they’re probably true,” she said with a sigh. “I don’t suppose you have time to get some lunch.”

“I thought you’d never ask,” Tammy said, her eyes lighting up at the prospect of more gossip. “You can tell me all about it.”

“Only if you promise not to tell anyone,” she said, giving her friend a look. “It has to be just between us.”

“Okay, fine,” Tammy said, clearly a little disappointed. “But you have to give me at least one thing I can pass on.”

“I don’t know why I’m friends with such a gossip,” she said, laughing. “But I’m sure I can think of something you can use.”

Since the diner was too crowded, they ordered their food to go, walked over to the park in the center of town, found a picnic table, and made themselves comfortable. “Okay, spill it,” Tammy said. “I can’t wait a second more to hear what’s going on out there. Everyone around town is saying that Mitchell has a baby, but I don’t believe it, it can’t be true.”

“Oh, it’s true, I was there when it happened,” she said, then filled her friend in on everything that had happened over the last two days. “So, now I’m in the middle of all this, and to make things worse, this morning Mitchell kissed me and it was.....”

“Wait, he what?” Tammy asked. “Did you just say he kissed you? How did that happen? You must have skipped over something.”

“It wasn’t that big of a deal,” she said. “He brought the baby over because she wouldn’t stop crying, we fell asleep on the couch together and when we woke up this morning, he kissed me.”

Tammy stared at her with her mouth open for a long time, “You’re still leaving something out,” she said, narrowing her eyes. “How exactly did this kiss happen? Did he just reach out and grab you or what?”

“Well, no, not exactly,” she hedged, then quickly blurted out the truth. “I was lying on top of him, I tried to get away, but I fell on him, and then he kissed me.”

Tammy burst out laughing and didn't stop for so long she began to get mad, “Tammy, this isn't funny,” she said. “I don't know what to do now.”

“If you want my advice, jump his bones,” her friend said, a huge smile on her face. “You two have been playing this game for too long, it's about time something happened.”

“You know I don't want to get involved with anyone, especially not someone I work with,” she said. “Besides, he's kind of my boss, that's just wrong.”

Tammy rolled her eyes, “Give me a break, he may be your boss on paper, but you've never taken orders from him,” she said. “That's just an excuse because you're scared.”

“I'm not scared, I'm.....” she trailed off. “And it's not an excuse, he's already hard enough to work with. He never listens to me. I have to fight him on every decision I make about the horses.”

“Well, if you start sleeping with him, you can just use sex to get your way,” Tammy said, shrugging her shoulders. “That doesn't seem like such a bad deal to me.”

She groaned, “That was not the answer I was looking for,” she said. “You're supposed to be on my side.”

“I am on your side, Connie,” Tammy said. “I've never seen two people who belong together as much as you and Mitchell do.”

“You did not just say that,” she said. “That was not what I wanted to hear.”

Tammy shrugged her shoulders, “But it's the truth,” she said. “I'm your best friend, Connie, the last thing I want is to see you get hurt. I'm just calling it like I see it.”

CHAPTER 9



MITCHELL

Mitchell pulled his truck into a parking space in front of the pharmacy, then looked over at the baby who was sound asleep in the car seat, trying to decide if getting her out would wake her up. The seat detached from the base, but he was so clumsy, he was sure that he'd jostle her, and the last thing he wanted was a crying baby. He'd had that experience a few too many times already. As reluctant as he was, he needed to get Gracie new formula, more diapers, and a short list of over-the-counter medications the doctor had recommended he keep on hand, so he got out of the truck.

After opening the door as quietly as he could, he studied the car seat again, running through the instructions in his mind, then held his breath as he disengaged it and slowly pulled the baby out of the vehicle. Letting out a relieved breath when she continued to sleep, he carried her inside the store, grabbed a shopping cart, set her gently into the basket, then stepped back. Feeling like he'd just accomplished something major, and more than a little proud of himself, he didn't notice the other shoppers staring at him as he made his way to the aisle with all the baby items.

As soon as he turned the cart into the aisle, he was instantly overwhelmed with all the bright packaging and strange items he'd never seen before. Start with the simplest thing, he told himself, wheeling the cart over to the diapers, but there were so many choices he could only stand staring at them for several long seconds, fighting back a feeling of panic. Taking the first package he found off the shelf, he studied it, read everything on the label, then realized that they were too big for Gracie.

When he spotted the new born size, he grabbed a package, but they were too small, and he put them back, finally settling on a size one, and threw

them into the cart along with two more packages. Mentally marking it off his list, he turned around and stared at the cans of formula, shocked at how many different kinds there were, then grabbed the crumpled piece of paper the doctor had given him out of his pocket.

He was scanning the shelves for the right one when Gracie woke up and began to fuss, her face scrunching up like it always did before she started one of her crying fits. By the time he managed to get her out of the car seat, she was bawling and waving her tiny arms in the air, but as soon as he put her on his shoulder, she began to calm down. Cooing to her, he looked around for the paper from the doctor, but it was nowhere to be seen, and he was the one who felt like crying.

Staring at the rows and rows of baby formula that occupied more than half the aisle, he frantically searched his mind for the name of the right one, but kept coming up empty. Letting out a sigh of frustration, he closed his eyes and took a deep breath, trying not to panic, then opened them again when he heard someone approaching. He turned expecting to see one of the employees, but it was a man dressed in jeans, a work shirt, and a pair of dusty boots, holding the hand of a little girl who was toddling along next to him.

“You look like you could use some help,” the man said, a friendly smile on his face. “Being a new parent is one of the hardest jobs in the world.”

“How did you know?” he asked, relieved someone understood. “The doctor recommended a new formula for Gracie, but I can’t remember which one. She’s got a sensitive stomach, I guess. It was written down on a little piece of paper, but I lost it in the shuffle of getting her out of the car seat just now.”

“Do you mean this one?” the man asked, plucking it out of Gracie’s blanket and handing it to him.

“That’s the one,” he said, with a sigh. “This is so much harder than I thought it would be.”

The man laughed, “It gets easier, give it a few months and you and your wife will have it down,” he said. “Trust me, I’ve been through it.”

He looked down at the adorable little girl, then back up at the man, “It’s just Gracie and I, her mother.....well, she didn’t want to be involved,” he said, then wished he hadn’t, sure a stranger didn’t want to hear his business. “Sorry, you didn’t need to know that, I’m just tired and a little punchy. Thanks for your help.”

“You’re welcome,” the man said. “But I’m glad you said something about

being all on your own. I was too, so I can understand what you're going through. In fact, there's a group of us that meets once a week if you'd like to join us."

He didn't answer right away, trying to work out what the man meant, "It's a group for single fathers. We get together talk about our kids, eat a bunch of good food, nothing fancy or formal," the man said, then stuck out his hand. "I'm Taylor Reynolds, I would swear we've met somewhere before."

Mitchell shifted the baby to his other arm, studying the man, "We might have. I'm Mitchell Stewart, I run a ranch about ten miles out of town," he said. "I think we might have met at a stock auction once a few years ago."

"I remember you now, you work for that rich guy who lives back East, don't you," Taylor said. "He comes out a couple times a year, right?"

"Yeah, that's me," he said. "It's a pretty good job, I've been trying to save up for my own ranch, but now....."

Taylor laughed, "Kids are expensive, but that's no reason to give up on your dreams," he said. "I know I'm being pushy, but I really think you should join us this week. Being a single dad is hard, and sometimes a little support can go a long way."

"I'll definitely think about it, but I've only had Gracie for a few days," he said. "I'm still trying to catch up."

"When you're ready, you'll find us in the back room of the diner every Saturday morning," Taylor said. "Good luck, hope you and Gracie get it all figured out."

Connie

Connie collapsed onto the couch with an exhausted grunt, ignoring the fact that she was covered in dust and several other substances she didn't want to think about. Helping Mitchell cope with suddenly being a father had turned out to be more of a commitment than she'd anticipated, and she hoped that he found a nanny for Gracie soon. But as hard of a time as she was having keeping up with her new responsibilities, she knew it was twice as hard on Mitchell and tried not to feel sorry for herself.

The baby was happy and healthy, eating like a pig on her new formula, but Mitchell was beginning to show the strain of trying to be a single father to an infant. The dark circles under his eyes had gotten deeper, his eyes were

dull and bloodshot half the time, and twice she'd had to order him to take a shower. Now that they were finished with the roundup and branding for the summer, she hoped that he could devote more time to finding someone to step in during the day and take care of the baby before it became too much for all of them.

She'd talk to Mitchell about it tomorrow she thought, dragging herself to her feet, knowing that she needed to shower and eat something before she fell asleep and the whole thing started all over again the next day. Wondering if she could get hazard pay for playing the role of cowgirl, she turned on the water as hot as it would go, then stepped in and let it cascade over her sore muscles, reminding herself that it wasn't forever.

Feeling a little more like herself after the shower, she put a frozen dinner in the microwave, then put together a salad, grabbed a book and settled down to eat, relishing the quiet in the little cabin. Sure, that she was going to sleep like a rock that night, she cleaned up after she was finished eating, then grabbed her phone, shut off the lights in the rest of the house and crawled into bed. Snuggling down into the covers, she closed her eyes, almost too tired to switch off the light, then lay staring at the ceiling for a second before reaching up and snapping it off. Before she could even close her eyes, her cell phone began to vibrate on the nightstand next to her, and she groaned, hoping it wasn't Mitchell with another baby emergency.

When she saw who it was, she wished it had been Mitchell, but sat up in bed, switched on the light, and picked up the call. "Hi, Mom, it's really late," she said. "Is everything okay?"

"No, everything is not okay," her mother said. "I'm tired and the last thing I wanted to do tonight was stay up this late to call you, but I assumed it was the only way I could get you to answer the phone. We need to talk about your visit home, it's only a few weeks away, and I have no idea how you're going to get here. I can't find an airport anywhere near you, which means I can't buy the tickets. I just don't understand how you can live out there in the middle of nowhere."

"Mom, I'm not coming home this month, we already talked about this," she said. "I'm busier than ever, it's just not possible."

There was a long silence then her mother sighed, "I was hoping it wouldn't come to this, that you would come to your senses and realize on your own where you belong, but since it has, I guess there's no place to go but forward," her mother said. "I've spoken at length with your grandparents

about this problem, and we're all in agreement that if you don't want to be a part of this family then that's your choice to make. We can't force you."

"Mom, we've been over this before, it's not that I don't want to be a part of the family, I just want different things for my life than you want for me," she said. "I still love you all, I'm not walking away from you, I just have a life here too, I don't understand why you can't accept that."

"But sweetheart, that's the point, we do accept that," her mother said, sounding entirely too reasonable. "I'm done trying to make you into something that you aren't, if you don't want to make a few sacrifices for the good of the family, there's nothing I can do about it except hide my face in shame, but we won't get into that."

"I'd hardly call marrying a man I don't love and producing a bunch of children just so the family can get richer a small sacrifice," she said, losing her patience. "That may have been fine for you, but times have changed. I'm not something to be bought and sold like one of your paintings or a piece of jewelry, I'm a human being with hopes and dreams of my own."

"I know, you've made that abundantly clear," her mother said. "I just wanted to give you one more chance to make us all proud, but I can see this was a wasted phone call. I hope you're very happy out there in that wretched place with all those cows and smelly men, because at this point that's about all you have left."

"What is that supposed to mean?" she asked, a sinking feeling in her stomach. "What are you trying to say?"

"Oh, nothing dear," her mother said, her voice now full of ice. "Have a nice evening."

The line went dead, and she pulled the phone away from her ear and stared at it, then fell back against the pillows, replaying the entire conversation in her mind. In the end, she decided that there was more than nothing going on, that her mother had been entirely too understanding, which meant she was up to something. There had been a time in her life when she would have gone running back home, but a lot had changed since those days, and she wasn't about to let her mother win, not when there was so much at stake.

CHAPTER 10



MITCHELL

Very aware of eyes following his progress across the diner, Mitchell gripped the handle on the car seat a little tighter, telling himself that people would get used to the idea that he was raising Gracie alone. He just hoped it wasn't going to take much longer. He was tired of being the main topic of conversation everywhere he went, and equally frustrating were the people who thought that it was their right to give him advice or the old women who insisted that a man couldn't raise a child alone and tried to fix him up with their daughter or granddaughter.

Going out in public, especially with Gracie, had become a chore he dreaded, but he'd ventured out that morning out of curiosity and a bit of desperation. The lure of meeting men in his situation had been enough to get him moving when all he'd wanted to do was sleep, but he still felt a bit silly, he wasn't the joining-in kind of guy, and he had no idea what to expect. But when he walked through the door, he was instantly put at ease, and when Taylor came walking up a second later, he knew that he'd made the right decision.

"Mitchell, glad you could make it," Taylor said, slapping him on the back. "Gracie looks happy this morning, I guess the new formula is working out."

"She's been little angel since I changed her over," he said. "I just wish everything else was going as smoothly."

"Oh, no, maybe we can help," Taylor said, guiding him further into the room. "Let's start with something to eat for you and a little tummy time with the other babies for Gracie. We always hire a couple of sitters for a few hours on Saturday just to give us a little space from the kids. I'll introduce you to

them when we take Gracie over. I promise they're reliable and we've checked all their references."

"Good enough for me, I've spent enough time doing that this week, I'll gladly let someone else handle it," he said. "I didn't realize it would be so hard to find someone to watch the baby, I've been through eight applicants and none of them have worked out. Three of them were convinced that I wasn't a suitable father since I'm single, two wanted to fix me up with one of their relatives, and the last three took other jobs before I could hire them. I don't know if I'm ever going to find anyone, and I'm pushing my people to their limits."

"Well, then you've come to the right place," Taylor said, taking Gracie from him. "Come on, we'll get Gracie settled with Tory and Paul, then we'll hit the buffet. I haven't eaten yet and I'm starving. I'll put out the word that you're looking for a full-time nanny, and I bet by the time we're done eating, someone will pop up with a name or two."

"Sounds good to me," he said, glad that he'd spoken up and not feeling quite as silly for coming. "This isn't what I thought it was going to be."

"Did you think we were all going to sit in a circle and tell our sad stories?" Taylor asked, a look of amusement on his face. "That's what I thought the first time I came also. I guess I should have explained better. This is more like a social club, sure we do the support thing, but mostly we're here together because we're all single fathers. We understand better than anyone else the challenges we face every day."

By the time they sat down at a table with two other men that Taylor had introduced as Ted and Miguel, he'd met half the men in the room, "Wow, everyone is so nice," he said. "I had no idea there were so many single fathers in town, I hope I can keep everyone's name straight."

"Don't worry about it," Taylor said. "No one will be insulted if you don't remember their name. Remember, most of us have been sleep deprived for years."

Everyone laughed, "That doesn't make me feel any better," he groaned. "I thought once Gracie started sleeping through the night that would get better."

"Well, it does some, but then there are bad dreams, monsters, drinks of water," Ted said. "And don't forget the all-important middle of the night trip to the bathroom."

"You left out thunder storms," Miguel said. "My little girl can hear a storm coming from miles away, one little boom and she's in bed with me,

and she's a cover hog, let me tell you."

It took his breath away when he realized that someday that would be him, telling stories about his little girl, and he tried to imagine what Gracie would look like when she was three or four. The thought made him smile, and he began to eat, content for the moment to listen to the other men talk, the quiet conversation a balm for his overwhelmed brain. He still had a lot to deal with at home, the ranch was hitting a critical point, but for just a few minutes, he could just relax and know that he was with people who understood.

He'd just pushed his empty plate away when a man he hadn't met yet walked up, "Are you Mitchell?" he asked. "I'm Peter Baldwin, and I think I might have the perfect answer to your nanny problem."

"Now that's what I've been hoping to hear for the last week," he said, getting to his feet and holding out his hand. "Mitchell Stewart, nice to meet you."

"My sister is going to spend the summer in town with me, and it was kinda short notice so she didn't have time to line up a job," he said. "She's an elementary school teacher, but she's great with kids of all ages. I'd use her myself but my son turned eight last winter, and he's spending the summer at camp."

"Wow, that sounds great," he said, hardly daring to believe that he could have gotten so lucky. "Gracie and I would love to meet her."

Connie

When Connie turned off the highway onto the long drive that led to the ranch house, she sighed with relief, looking forward to getting back to her little cabin and her normal routine. The few days away had done wonders for her state of mind. It had given her a chance to get control of the unwanted feelings she'd been developing for Mitchell, some distance to see that it was just the circumstances that were the problem. She'd become much too involved in his life, it had been unavoidable considering Gracie's unannounced arrival, but it was time to pull away before she was completely sucked in.

That meant setting some boundaries, no more late-night knocks on the door, no more dinners together just because it was easier, and most importantly no kissing. She'd still help with Gracie, she was already more than a little attached to the baby, but that was different, she understood their

relationship, knew exactly where she stood.

With Mitchell it was a completely different story, nothing between had ever been clear, and the kiss that morning had muddied the water so much that she wasn't sure what she wanted anymore, and that had to stop. Distance and professionalism were what she needed and what she'd get, even if it meant that she couldn't help Mitchell with Gracie anymore, a thought that made her a little sad.

Ignoring the feeling, she parked her truck in front of her cabin, got out and grabbed her bags, then climbed the porch stairs. Her little cabin looked just as she'd left it, and she bustled around for a few minutes unpacking, watering her plants, and just enjoying the space she'd made for herself. When she couldn't avoid it any longer, she left the cabin and headed for the ranch house to check in with Mitchell and let him know how her trip had gone.

She let herself into the kitchen, surprised when the smell of baking cookies greeted her, and looked around for Josie, thrilled with the idea that she'd come home early. It would make life so much easier with the older woman there, but it wasn't Josie standing by the stove. It was a young woman holding Gracie as if she belonged to her.

The woman turned from the stove, a look of confusion appeared on her face, but it was quickly replaced by a smile, "Oh, hi, you must be Dr. Delmonico. Mitchell said you would probably stop by this morning," she said. "I'm Clarissa, Gracie's new nanny. It's so nice to meet you."

Thrown off guard, it took her a second to answer, "It's nice to meet you too," she finally managed to say. "I'm glad Mitchell finally found someone to help with the baby."

Clarissa smiled down at Gracie, "We've been getting along famously, haven't we, princess," she said, then looked back up at her. "I just adore kids, no matter how old they are, don't you?"

"I've grown attached to that one," she said, putting a smile on her face. "Could I hold her for a few minutes?"

"Oh, dear, I'm sorry, I should have thought....." Clarissa said, then handed Gracie over to her. "Of course, you've gotten attached, it's impossible not to."

Gracie snuggled into her arms with a little sigh, "We've had a couple of rough nights together," she said, smiling down at the baby. "But we made it through, didn't we?"

"You're a veterinarian, aren't you?" Clarissa asked. "Taking care of

animals can't be that much different than a baby."

"No, I guess not, but they're a lot bigger than this little lady," she said. "She's so small, and she was always screaming and crying when she first got here. It was intimidating at first."

"That's funny, those were the exact words that Mitchell used," Clarissa said, cocking her head and studying her for second, making her suddenly feel uncomfortable. "He told me that you were the one who figured out her formula wasn't right. I could tell he was impressed. Now that I think about it, he talked about you a lot."

She wasn't sure how to respond, "Oh, well.....Mitchell and I have worked together for a while now, and I was here helping him a lot," she said. "We're kind of like a family around here."

"So, you're just friends," Clarissa seemed eager to clarify the point. "I mean.....well, I wouldn't want to step on any toes, if you know what I mean."

Her first instinct was to tell Clarissa to back off, but she realized she didn't have any kind of claim on Mitchell, and shouldn't want one. "He and I are just friends, most of the time barely that," she said, hating the cold spot of disappointment that began to form in her stomach. "The only reason we've been being nice to each other lately is Gracie. She needed both of us, but I guess now that you're here.....I can get on with my life."

"I'm sure you have more important things to do besides taking care of a baby," Clarissa said, a pleased smile on her face. "After all, you're responsible for the health of all the animals on the ranch. I'm sure your energy could be put to much better use. Didn't you just get back from looking at some really expensive horses that your boss wants to buy?"

It was clear Clarissa was trying to send her a message, "Yes, as a matter of fact, I did," she said. "I was looking for Mitchell so we could talk about it. I'm going to give the okay, and I'm sure he won't be happy about it."

"Well, that's too bad, I hate to see him upset," Clarissa said. "How about I let him know you were here when he comes in for lunch? I'm sure he'll come down to the barn or wherever it is you work when he's finished. The house really isn't the place for business. It's not good for the baby, she needs a peaceful environment. I can't have you getting everyone all upset."

A hundred responses popped into her head, but she bit her tongue and carefully handed Gracie back to the woman, "Well, then, I guess I should get going," she said, keeping her voice level. "I've got a lot of work to do."

“I’m sure you do,” Clarissa said. “Feel free to stop by to see Gracie any time. Just do me a favor and let me know that you’re coming next time; that way we won’t disrupt her schedule.”

“Of course,” she said, starting for the door, praying that she’d make it before she said something she’d regret. “Have a good day.”

“You too,” Clarissa chirped at her.

CHAPTER 11



MITCHELL

Mitchell told himself that he wasn't rushing home because he'd missed Connie when she'd been gone, or admit to himself that he'd been watching for her truck all morning. Nor was he going to acknowledge the flash of desire that shot through him when he saw her crossing the lawn toward the house from her cabin. Instead, he told himself he was going back to the house because he wanted to check in on Gracie, make sure that she and Clarissa were getting along. After all, it was their first day together, and his daughter could be a handful.

He was willing to admit that he'd spent more time than he should have thinking about the dark-haired beauty and the kiss that they'd shared. He had even spent a few sleepless hours when he couldn't get her off his mind, trying to decide if it had been a mistake or the smartest thing he'd ever done. Gracie arriving in his life had turned everything upside down, and he was afraid to trust the urges guiding him, scared that he was creating a mess he would have to clean up later when his mind was functioning again.

None of that stopped his feet and before he knew it, he was climbing up the stairs, but just as he got to the top, the door opened and Connie came out, a frown on her face. "Oh, Mitchell, your new nanny said you wouldn't be back until lunchtime," she said, then looked over her shoulder. "She was going to send you to the barn when you were finished eating."

"Oh, well.....I don't think I told her that, but I guess it doesn't matter," he said, a bit confused. "I saw you headed to the house so I came back to..... to check on Gracie.....it's Clarissa's first day, but since we're both here, come back inside and tell me about your trip."

"Are you sure you want to hear about it?" she asked, remembering

Clarissa's words. "You're not going to like what I have to say, and I don't want to upset you."

He stopped and turned back around, "Since when are you afraid of making me mad?" he asked. "Sometimes I think you disagree with me on purpose just to make me mad."

"I don't....." she started to say, shocked that he knew that. "Well, I didn't do it that often."

He burst out laughing, both at the look on her face and because he'd been right, "You are a complicated woman, Connie," he said, grinning at her. "I think that's why I can't get you out of my mind, but you can't treat me like I'm going to break, I've had a rough time lately, but I'm still me. Now come inside and tell me the bad news about the new horses we're getting."

Connie looked at the kitchen door, then back at him, "I can't, Clarissa doesn't want us doing business around the baby, especially if it's going to annoy you," she said. "She more or less kicked me out of the house."

That surprised him, "Oh, I'm sure that's not what she meant, you probably just heard her wrong," he said. "She's a nice woman, Connie, and she's good with the baby. Come inside, you'll see."

When they walked in, Clarissa was sitting with the baby in her lap giving her a bottle, "Oh, Mitchell, I didn't expect you back so soon," she said, a big smile on her face until she saw Connie standing behind him. "And you brought Dr. Delmonico back with you. How lovely, she and I were getting to know each other earlier. Give me a few minutes and I'll get you something to drink. I can have lunch ready in jiffy if you're hungry."

"Stay right where you are," he said. "You're here to take care of Gracie, not me. Connie and I will be fine on our own."

"But it's no trouble, I enjoy taking care of both of you," Clarissa said, flashing him a big smile. "Daddy needs some pampering too, doesn't he, Gracie?"

"I appreciate it, but Connie and I will just grab something to drink and stay out of your way," he said, walking over and giving Gracie a kiss on the forehead. "You just worry about getting big and strong, missy."

When he walked back over to Connie, she had a strange look on her face but quickly covered it up with a smile. "She's so sweet," she said. "I'm going to miss taking care of her."

"She's not going anywhere, and you're welcome to spend as much time with her as you want," he said, walking over to the coffee pot. "Coffee or

tea?”

“Coffee is fine,” Connie said, her eyes darting over to Clarissa. “But this really won’t take that long.”

“You’ve been gone for days, Connie,” he said. “We have a lot to talk about, not just the horses you’re going to tell Templeton to buy.”

“How do you know that’s what I’m going to do?” she asked, giving in when he handed her a cup. “I didn’t say that.”

“Well, since you said it was going to upset me, I put two and two together,” he said. “Let’s sit down, and you can tell me about them.”

Connie looked at him uncertainly, “Why are you suddenly so interested?” she asked, glancing over at Clarissa. “You’ve never wanted to hear about my trips before.”

He didn’t answer at first, then decided that honesty might be the best way to go, “I’ve never missed you when you went on one before,” he said, looking down into her eyes. “I wasn’t joking when I said I can’t stop thinking about you. I guess I just wanted to see what would happen if we weren’t fighting.”

Connie

Heart hammering in her chest, Connie looked up into Mitchell’s eyes and, seeing only sincerity, felt her heart melting a little bit. Fighting off the urge to throw herself into his arms, she took several deep breaths as thrills rushed through her, but she finally managed to remember who she was talking to. Shaking her head, she backed away a couple of steps, needing to put some space between them, afraid to give in to what was suddenly starting to feel so right.

“Why now?” she finally managed to ask. “What changed?”

Mitchell thought about it for a second, “I guess I did, well, everything did,” he said, shaking his head. “I don’t know exactly how to explain it. For so long I’ve only had one goal, to buy my own ranch and make it work, but now.....well, it’s not that it isn’t important anymore, but I’m beginning to see that there are other things that are more important.”

“Are you saying that I’m one of those things?” she asked, then wished she hadn’t. “Never mind, I don’t want to hear the answer to that question.”

“Yes, you do, or you wouldn’t have asked,” he said, grinning at her. “I don’t know if you’re more important yet, Connie, because I’ve spent so much

time trying to keep you at arm's length, I've never gotten a chance to get to know you."

"Oh, Mitchell, that's not fair," she said. "I don't know how to deal with you when you're like this. Can't we just go back to disliking each other?"

"I don't think so. Besides, we both know that wasn't how it really was," he said, taking a step toward her. "All that anger was just to cover up how we really felt."

When she didn't answer right away, he tipped her chin up, "You know that's the truth, Connie," he said. "If you can look me in the eyes and tell me that I'm wrong, we can go back to the way things were, and I won't mention it again."

She had the words all ready to say, could feel them forming on her lips until she looked into his eyes and they evaporated from her brain. The urge to throw herself into his arms was back again, and all she could do was sigh in defeat and close her eyes, afraid of what she might do if she didn't.

She felt his lips brush across hers, sending ripples of pleasure washing through her, "That's what I thought," he whispered, then kissed her again. "You can open your eyes now, Connie."

Just as she did, Clarissa came bustling over to them, "Oh, I'm sorry, did I interrupt something?" she said, trying to look innocent. "Gracie's down for her nap, so I thought I'd clean the kitchen. Don't let me disturb you."

"Not at all," she said, backing away from Mitchell, her cheeks flaming. "We'll just get out of your way."

"Oh, you're not in my way, I just thought.....well.....don't you have work to do?" Clarissa asked innocently. "You said you were way behind earlier."

"Maybe I should get going," she said, desperate to get away from the intensity in Mitchell's eyes. "I have sick animals to look after. We can talk later, Mitchell."

She made her escape without even saying goodbye to Gracie and locked herself in her office for the rest of the day, using the excuse that she had to do paperwork, but spent the hours reliving their conversation instead. She wasn't quite ready to admit that he was right, that all the anger and dislike between them was just to keep their attraction to one another under control, knowing that if she did, even just to herself, there would be no turning back.

Forcing herself to concentrate on the paperwork for the new horses, she managed to fill the rest of her day, then went home to the quiet of her cabin

and spent the evening sulking about the mess her life had suddenly become. She didn't want to fall in love, hadn't planned that little milestone for this point in her life, and wondered if it was even love as she banged pots and pans around on the stove.

Wasn't she perfectly happy being single? Hadn't she always known that she didn't need a man in her life? She thought as she dug through the refrigerator. What right did Mitchell have to come along and upset the careful balance they'd achieved? Who did he think he was messing with what had been a perfect working relationship? Now it was all screwed up and would never be the same. He'd ruined everything, she decided, working up a good head of steam.

When there was a knock on the door, she knew instinctively that it was him and threw it open with more force than she intended. "I'm mad at you," she said, then turned and stomped away. "You just couldn't leave it alone, could you? You just had to go and get all soft and human on me. Do you have any idea what you've done?"

Mitchell followed her into the house, dropping the diaper bag he'd been carrying onto the floor, but didn't say anything, so she turned to face him. "Aren't you going to say anything?" she demanded, getting even angrier when he just smiled at her. "Didn't you hear what I said? I'm mad at you."

"I heard every word," he said, crossing the room to stand right in front of her. "I was just enjoying watching you. Your eyes flash when you're angry. Did you know that?"

She realized suddenly that he had the baby strapped to his chest, and her anger deflated, "Are you really going to do this in front of Gracie?" she asked, forcing herself to turn away from him. "She doesn't need to see us fighting. It can't be good for her."

"We're not fighting," he said. "You're angry, and I'm letting you vent."

"You're impossible," she said, going to the cabinet and getting down another plate. "I can't even have a conversation with you."

When she set it down on the table and added silverware, Mitchell laughed, "But evidently we're having dinner together," he said, grinning at her. "How did you know I was starving?"

"Just sit down," she said, giving him a dirty look. "And don't you dare say another word, or I might change my mind."

CHAPTER 12



MITCHELL

Mitchell pushed open the kitchen door, bracing himself for Clarissa's greeting, wondering how hard it was going to be to get her to go home that night, and wishing that she wasn't so good with Gracie so he could get rid of her. It was becoming more and more apparent that Clarissa wasn't there just for the paycheck, and he wondered if it had been planned from the very beginning. Shaking off the thought, telling himself that he was being paranoid, he walked inside, surprised to find the kitchen deserted.

"Hello, is anyone here?" he called, fighting back a wave of panic. "I'm home."

When there was no answer, the wave of panic found a way through his defenses, and he began frantically searching the kitchen for a note or anything that might tell him where they'd gone. He was about to pull out his phone to call the police when Clarissa came rushing into the kitchen, her usual jeans and tee-shirt replaced by a sundress and a pair of glittering high heeled sandals.

"Oh, Mitchell, there you are," she said, giving him a big smile. "What do you think of my new dress?"

"It's very nice," he said. "Where's Gracie?"

"Oh, I put her to bed in her room," Clarissa said, a pouty look on her face. "I thought we could have a little alone time. You've been rushing me home every night this week, but tonight I'm not going anywhere."

"Clarissa, I want to see Gracie," he said, trying to push past her. "I don't get to see her during the day anymore, so this time we spend together at night is important."

"One night won't hurt anything, she won't even remember," Clarissa

said, pushing him back toward the table. "I want you to sit down and let me wait on you. I made your favorite dinner. You just relax, I'll take care of everything."

Feeling trapped, he sat frozen in his chair, wondering how he was going to get out of this without losing his nanny, "Ummm.....I appreciate the effort, but I'm not sure.....that is.....I wouldn't want people to think....." he stammered. "You know.....you and me.....it's not professional for us....."

"We're only having dinner," Clarissa said, going over to the stove and pulling out two plates. "There's nothing wrong with that, and if something more were to happen, well, that's no one's business. We're both consenting adults."

When she brought the food over and sat down, he looked over at her, "Clarissa, you have to know that nothing can happen between us," he said. "You work for me, and that's a boundary I won't cross. You're a very attractive woman, but....."

"Oh, Mitchell, you're much too serious," Clarissa said. "Let's just enjoy dinner and see where it leads."

That was the last thing he wanted to do, the sense that he was suddenly on a slippery slope had only gotten stronger, and he searched his mind desperately for an excuse to stop what was happening. Being alone with Clarissa when Gracie was around had seemed just fine, but dinner by themselves was something entirely different, and he knew that he had to take control of the situation.

"I'm trying to explain to you that it's not going to lead anywhere," he said, determined to make sure that she understood very clearly where he stood. "We can't be anything but employer and employee, Clarissa. You're a great nanny, but I'm not looking for anything more than that."

Clarissa studied him for a second, then shook her head, "I don't think you know what you want," she finally said, then jumped to her feet. "Oh, I forgot the candles, how silly of me."

When she came back with two tall tapered candles, lit them, then turned off all the lights in the kitchen, he got to his feet, "We're going to have to end this dinner now, this isn't right, Clarissa," he said. "And it's making me extremely uncomfortable. I think you should go home now."

"But I worked so hard on this dinner," she said, her bottom lip beginning to tremble. "It was supposed to be perfect.....you were supposed to....."

“I’m sorry, Clarissa,” he said, shaking his head. “If I gave you the impression there could be more between us, I never meant to. The truth is, there’s someone else that I’m interested in.”

Clarissa’s face hardened but it only lasted for a second before a sly smile appeared on her face, “I bet I could make you forget her,” she said, walking over to him and wrapping her arms around him, then rubbed her body up against his. “Just think of all the fun we could have, and the best part is there are no strings attached. We can enjoy each other for the summer, and then I’ll be gone.”

A lot of men would have found the invitation impossible to resist, many would have given in to the temptation, but Connie popped into his mind, and he discovered all he felt was disgust. He was in the process of trying to untangle himself from Clarissa’s arms when there was a knock on the door and Connie stepped inside, her face full of concern. She froze when she saw them, her face filling with confusion, then she started backing away.

“Oh, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to interrupt,” she said, her voice shaking. “I just thought.....when you didn’t show up for dinner.....never mind, I can see that everything is fine. I’ll just leave you two alone.”

Before he could say a word, Connie was running down the porch steps and disappearing into the darkness, “Well, that was very rude,” Clarissa said, a triumphant smile on her face. “You really have to have a talk with that woman about barging in like that.”

Shoving Clarissa away, he stood staring at her for a few seconds trying to get his anger under control, “Go home now,” he finally barked. “And don’t come back here tomorrow unless you can behave like a professional.”

Connie

Connie couldn’t remember the last time she’d felt the sting of humiliation quite so deeply and cursed herself for being such an idiot, for believing that Mitchell was anything but a huge jerk. She should have known that he was just playing games with her, should have known he hadn’t changed. Instead, she’d lapped up all the attention he’d given her like a starving kitten. Trying to hold back the tears that filled her eyes, she stomped down the trail to her cabin, refusing to give in to the heartache that filled her chest, telling herself that he wasn’t worth that much energy.

But when she finally slammed the cabin door closed behind her, she

couldn't fight any longer, and the tears poured down her cheeks, the pain in her chest expanded until she could barely breathe. Leaning against the door, she gave up and began to sob as she slowly slipped to the floor, hating herself for giving in. She pulled her knees up to her chest, buried her face in her knees, and rocked back and forth until the pain eased and she could breathe again.

Even more ashamed that she'd let him get to her so deeply, she took a deep breath, got to her feet, and stood gathering her strength for a few minutes before going into the kitchen and dumping the dinner she'd made into the trash. It would be the last dinner she ever made for him, she promised herself, ignoring the feeling of loss that settled over her as she washed the dishes. She was done being helpful, done caring what happened to Mitchell. If that meant she couldn't be a part of Gracie's life, that was the price she'd have to pay to hold onto what little pride she had left.

She'd just finished draining the sink when there was a knock on the door. Cursing herself for the burst of hope that made her heart beat faster, she slowly dried her hands, then walked over to the door. Taking a deep breath, she opened the door but didn't say anything, just stood staring at Mitchell, doing her best to ignore the look of misery on his face.

"Connie, it wasn't what it looked like," he said, shifting Gracie to the other shoulder. "Can we please come in so I can explain?"

"You shouldn't have brought the baby out, it's late," she said. "She should be home in bed."

"Then let us in so I'm not standing out here in the cold with her," he said. "I couldn't let you go to bed thinking that there was something happening between Clarissa and me. That dinner thing was all her idea, I tried shutting her down from the very beginning, but she wouldn't listen."

She studied him for a second, then with a sigh stepped back so he and the baby could come inside, "You might as well put Gracie in the travel crib," she said. "But that doesn't mean I believe you. I just don't want to hurt her when I punch you."

She watched Mitchell gently lay Gracie down, trying to remind herself that she was mad at him when his tenderness made her yearn to feel his arms around her. When he finally turned to face her, she made herself glare at him again until the anger was back, but kept her distance, afraid that it wouldn't take much to make her forget what he'd done.

"Connie, I'm so sorry that you had to see that tonight," he said, taking a

step toward her. “I really didn’t know that Clarissa had all that planned, and I wasn’t a willing participant. All I could think about was coming here to have dinner with you.”

She studied him for a second, recognizing the sincerity in his eyes, but still felt the sting of walking in on them, “I was worried about you when you didn’t show up. I kept thinking that something was wrong with Gracie or that you’d been hurt,” she said. “Then, when I couldn’t stand it anymore and went up to the house, I walked in on the two of you in each other’s arms. It was humiliating, Mitchell.”

“I know, sweetheart, I’m sorry, I should have called you or just left. I didn’t handle it right,” he said. “But it all happened so fast. One minute she’s making me sit down at the table, the next, she’s propositioning me. Then, when I tried to shut her down, she just came on stronger. I was trying to get away from here when you walked in. You have to believe me. I don’t want anything to do with Clarissa. I want you, Connie. I’ve wanted you since the day you walked onto the ranch, but you were off-limits. I couldn’t do anything about it. Now I don’t care, I’m done fighting the way I feel about you. Maybe it’s because of Gracie, maybe it’s because I realized that life can change in an instant, I don’t know. But what I do know is that there’s something special between us, something that most people would love to have. The last thing I would do is throw that away for some little.....”

“Tramp,” she finished, then shook her head. “I’m sorry, that wasn’t nice.”

“But it wasn’t that far from the truth,” he said. “Please tell me that you understand, Connie. I don’t want someone like that coming between us. I know I haven’t given you much reason to, but I hope that you’ll trust me on this one.”

This time when he moved closer, she let him, her resistance slowly fading, “I knew that she was after you the first time I met her. She made that more than clear,” she said with a sigh. “I guess I thought it worked, and well.....after all the time we’ve been spending together.....it hurt.”

“The last thing I want to do is hurt you,” Mitchell said, enfolding her in his arms. “That’s why we’ve been taking this so slow. So much has changed in my life, I didn’t want to screw this up by rushing things.”

His solid warmth felt so good she couldn’t help but sigh, “I guess I shouldn’t have jumped to conclusions,” she said. “I should have given you a chance to explain, but.....”

“I don’t blame you if I’d walked in on that scene,” he said, a grin

spreading across his face. “Clarissa would have had a black eye.”

“Honestly, it did cross my mind,” she said, a smile slowly spreading across her face. “But it wasn’t Clarissa I wanted to punch, it was you, and I’m still thinking I might.”

Mitchell laughed, “You could punch me,” he said, lowering his mouth to hers, his eyes suddenly full of desire. “But I have a much better idea, something I think we’ll both enjoy.”

CHAPTER 13



MITCHELL

After pouring himself another cup of coffee, Mitchell looked up at the clock, wondering if Clarissa was going to show up. A part of him hoped that she didn't. It would be so much easier not to have to deal with what had happened the night before, to move on and spend the day looking for yet another nanny for Gracie instead of having another very uncomfortable conversation with Clarissa. But she was good with Gracie, and if she could accept that's all there would ever be to her job, he thought they might be able to move on and continue the professional relationship.

When he heard Clarissa's car pull up in front of the house, he got to his feet, checked on Gracie to make sure she was happy and content, then turned to face the door, not sure what to expect. It wasn't a smiling happy face that came through the door or a cheerful good morning; all he could do was watch as Clarissa buzzed about the room, putting away her purse and pouring herself a cup of coffee.

"Shouldn't you get going?" she asked when she finally noticed him watching her. "You're going to be late."

"Clarissa, we have to talk," he said. "We can't just pretend that last night didn't happen."

Tears appeared in her eyes, "I was hoping you'd forgotten that," she said, her bottom lip quivering. "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, it's just that all the nanny jobs I've had before.....well, there were certain things that were expected of me. I just thought that's what you wanted, and I figured I'd get it over with as fast as I could so it wouldn't be so....."

The tears rolled down her cheek, but he didn't say anything for a second, trying to decide if she was telling the truth. "Are you telling me that the other

fathers that you've worked for have expected you to have sex with them?" he finally asked, trying to gauge her reaction. "You do know that's not normal, right?"

"I didn't have any choice, I needed the money," she said, sobbing a little. "It was so awful, one of the mothers even made me..... oh, I can't talk about it."

Against his better judgment he decided to believe her, "That's not the way things are around here," he said. "I don't want you to be anything but Gracie's nanny."

"Really?" she asked. "I thought you were going to fire me."

"No, I'm going to let it go this time, but nothing like that had better ever happen again," he said. "And I am going to be watching you."

"Oh, Mitchell, thank you," Clarissa said, throwing herself into his arms. "You're the best boss ever."

He untangled himself from her arms, "And you can't do things like that," he said. "From now on, we don't touch each other."

"Can't I even shake your hand?" she asked, grinning at him. "Surely a handshake won't hurt anything."

"Fine, a handshake it is," he said, holding out his hand. "I'm glad we could work this out."

"Me too," Clarissa said, a big smile on her face. "I really like working here."

As soon as he left the house, Mitchell headed straight for the barn, where he knew that he'd find Connie bossing everyone around, trying to get ready for the six new horses that would be arriving later that day. She'd been making lists and preparing the stalls for a couple of days, and he wanted to be supportive instead of making fun of her like he usually did. He could hear her voice before he got to the barn doors and couldn't help but smile when a burst of desire rushed through him. Even the woman's voice drove him crazy.

He stood just inside the doors for a long time watching her, wondering why he'd waited so long to admit how he felt, how he could have been so stupid and wasted so much time fighting what was clearly meant to be. When he'd had his fill of watching, he strode over to her, waited until she saw him, then waved her over, trying not to smile when he saw the annoyance on her face.

"I need to talk to you about something," he said. "Can we go to your office?"

“Mitchell, I’m a little busy here,” she said. “Can’t it wait?”

He pretended to think about it for a second, then shook his head, “No, I don’t think it can wait,” he said. “I need to see you in your office right now.”

She gave him a dirty look, “Fine, but this had better be important,” she said, stomping off toward her office. “Aren’t you coming?”

As soon as he walked through the door, he turned around, closed it, and flipped the lock, “Mitchell, what are you doing?” she asked, then let out a cry of surprise when he pulled her into his arms. “Is this what you wanted?”

“Not just this,” he said, lowering his mouth to hers. “I want this too.”

He kissed her until they were both breathless, then let her go, “Okay, you can go back to work now,” he said, grinning at her. “I’m sure you have a lot to do before the newest round of ridiculously expensive horses arrive.”

“Mitchell Stewart, you can’t just drag me into my office to kiss me,” she said, putting her hands on her hips. “I have a job to do. You said it was important.”

“It was important, I needed to kiss you,” he said, reaching for her. “I think I might need to do it again. Come on, I won’t tell the boss.”

“Well, since you’re the boss, I don’t think that makes me feel any better,” she said, but let him wrap his arms around her. “What happened with Clarissa?”

“She gave me a sob story about all her other employers expecting them to have sex with her,” he said. “I don’t believe her for a second, but I decided to give her a second chance.”

Connie shook her head, “You’re going to be sorry,” she said. “You should have fired her.”

“You’re probably right,” he said, nuzzling her neck. “But I was feeling generous this morning.”

“Mitchell, stop that,” Connie said, her voice husky with desire. “I can’t think when you do that.”

“That was my plan,” he said. “How good is that lock on your door?”

“Oh, no, you don’t,” she said, trying to slip out of his arms. “We’ve got six horses on the way, and my office is not the place for that.”

“Are you sure?” he asked, trailing kisses down her neck. “That couch looks pretty comfortable.”

Connie

The temptation to give in was stronger than it had ever been, but Connie managed to resist even though her entire body was humming with desire. “Mitchell, we have to get back out there,” she managed to say. “They’re going to miss us soon.”

Just then there was a knock on the door, and she quickly pushed Mitchell away, “I told you,” she said, hoping her cheeks weren’t as flushed as they felt. “You’d better go unlock the door.”

Mitchell grinned down at her, “Guess you were right,” he said. “We’ll just have to postpone this discussion for another time.”

“Just go open the door,” she said, shaking her head. “They’re going to start getting suspicious.”

“Like they haven’t already noticed,” he said. “But you’re the boss, so we’ll just keep pretending that there’s nothing going on between us.”

Connie studied him for a second, “I don’t care if they all know that we’re.....well.....dating,” she said. “But having a make-out session when we’re all supposed to be working isn’t very professional.”

“Dr. Delmonico, I’m sorry to interrupt,” Tommy called through the closed door, his voice uncertain, “but the horses are here.”

“Oh, no, we’re not ready,” she said, going over to the door and opening it. “Where are they?”

“The lead driver just called, they’re about ten miles away,” Tommy said. “I guess they made better time than they expected.”

“Well then, we’d better finish getting ready,” she said, turning to give Mitchell a look. “I’ll need everyone’s help, including you, Romeo.”

Mitchell laughed, but Tommy looked uncomfortable, “Thanks for letting us know, Tommy,” she said. “You’ve been such a big help; I just want you to know how much I appreciate it.”

It took a lot of scrambling, but they had the barn ready for the horses when the three trucks, all hauling horse trailers, pulled into the yard half an hour later. “You still haven’t told me anything about these horses,” he said as they stood waiting for the driver to get out of the trucks. “How much money did Mr. Templeton drop on this bunch?”

She looked over at him and grinned, “Not as much as you think,” she said. “I haven’t told you anything because I wanted it to be a surprise.”

“You just didn’t want to hear me complain about what a waste of money it is,” he said, shrugging his shoulders, but there was a little smile on his face. “Now let’s see what you spent Mr. Templeton’s money on.”

“Yes, let’s,” she said, pulling him toward the first trailer. “But you should probably get ready to apologize.”

“For what?” he asked, then saw the first horse as it came out of the trailer. “Wait, is that.....”

“An Appaloosa,” she finished for him. “Yep, and there are two more, along with three Quarter horses.”

He watched as the other horses were unloaded and tied to the hitching rail in front of the barn, then turned to look over at Connie. “I don’t understand, I thought we were getting more horses for the breeding program,” he said. “These all look like good working horses, but I’m not sure they’re what Mr. Templeton wants for his breeders.”

“No, they aren’t,” she said. “But we didn’t buy them for the breeding program, we bought them to work the cattle. I talked him into it.”

He could only stare at her for several long seconds, “You talked him into it?” he repeated. “When? Why?”

“Last winter. I’ve been working on this for months,” she said. “While you were very annoying with all your complaints about the breeding program, you weren’t wrong. I didn’t tell you, because well.....I didn’t want you to think that you’d won.”

“You did this for me,” he said, a big smile spreading across his face. “Even when we were going at each other, you took the time and energy to give me something I really wanted. Now I feel bad for giving you so much grief.”

“You should,” she said, grinning back at him. “But I’m sure you can find a way to make it up to me.”

“I can think of a few right now,” he said, wiggling his eyebrows at her. “But it wouldn’t be very professional.”

She laughed, “Come on, let’s go meet your new horses,” she said, pulling him over to the hitching rail. “You might want to tell your people the good news, they all look as confused as you did.”

It was late afternoon before she was satisfied that the horses were adjusting to their new environment and felt confident enough to leave them alone in the barn. Mitchell gave everyone the rest of the day off, earning him a cheer from the crew, and only minutes later the barn was deserted as they scattered in different directions to enjoy a few extra hours of freedom.

“Well, that didn’t take long,” Mitchell said, looking around and laughing. “If I’d know that was all it would take to get some time alone with you, I

would have given them some time off sooner.”

With the barn deserted, she didn't resist when he pulled her into his arms and lowered his mouth to hers. “Thank you,” he said when he finally let her up for air. “That was a very sweet thing you did for me, and I don't think you did it just because I was annoying you.”

She looked up at him, “That might be true, but I'll never admit it,” she said, smiling at him. “I wouldn't want you to think I like you or anything.”

“No, we wouldn't want that,” he said. “But I am curious about the ‘anything’ you're talking about.”

“I guess you'll just have to keep wondering,” she said, stretching up to kiss him. “A woman can't reveal all her secrets at once.”

CHAPTER 14



MITCHELL

Mitchell climbed the porch stairs thinking that life couldn't get much better. Gracie was thriving, his relationship with Connie was blossoming, and he'd just spent the day putting six very fine horses through their paces out in the pasture. It might not have been what he'd seen for his future, but fate had stepped in and chosen a different one for him, and although he'd fought it at first, he was determined to make the most of what he'd been given. Looking forward to a hot shower and then dinner with Connie afterward, he pushed open the kitchen door, wondering if he should figure out what he was going to cook first.

Lost in his thoughts, it took him a second to realize that there was something off, but a quick glance around the kitchen gave him his first clue that he had a new problem, and he let out a long sigh. In the space of only a day, the kitchen looked like it hadn't been cleaned in a week, dirty clothes and diapers were spread all over the room, the sink was heaped with dirty dishes, and the trash was overflowing.

Clarissa was lying on the couch, clicking away at her phone while Gracie lay in her playpen dressed only in a diaper. "Oh, hey, are you home already?" she said, getting slowly to her feet and stretching lazily. "I just found this new game online, and I must have lost track of the time. I guess I'll be heading home now."

"Clarissa, this place is a mess. If I didn't know better, I'd think you did this on purpose," he said. "Do you want to explain yourself?"

"Not really," she said, then wrinkled up her nose. "You stink like a horse; you should really think about taking a shower before you come in the house. Some of us could do without the smell."

It took him a second to get his anger under control, "I'm losing my patience with this game," he said. "I want you to clean this mess up before you go home."

"And if I don't?" she challenged, clearly enjoying herself. "I realized after I got home last night that you need me more than I need you. In fact, I was thinking that you're not paying me nearly enough. I think we should renegotiate my salary, especially if you want me to cook and clean up after you."

"Clarissa, cooking for me was your idea, I told you repeatedly not to do it," he said, shaking his head. "I hired you to take care of Gracie, which was clearly a mistake for many reasons. I think you should go home now and don't come back tomorrow."

"What, you're firing me?" Clarissa demanded. "You can't do that; I have a contract. Besides, you won't have anyone to take care of Gracie, you need me."

"That's where you're wrong, I don't need you, Clarissa. I was doing just fine before you got here," he said, trying his best to keep his voice level. "I'm done playing games with you, I'm canceling your contract, which I have the right to do, and asking you not to come back tomorrow. I'll deposit the money I owe you into your account tonight. Our professional relationship is over, please get your things and leave."

"You can't do this, I'll sue you," Clarissa said, shoving past him to get her purse. "I'll make you sorry you did this to me, I was only trying to make you happy, to be a good employee, and you threw it back in my face. You're an ungrateful jerk, Mitchell, and I wouldn't go to bed with you if you were the last man on Earth."

She slammed out of the kitchen, leaving him standing in the middle of the mess, his earlier good mood only a memory, "Well, kiddo, it looks like it's just you and me again," he said, walking over to the playpen. "I don't know about you, but I'm sure glad Josie is going to be home in a few days. Maybe she can help me sort this out because I'm clearly not doing something right."

When Gracie stretched her arms up to him with what looked like a smile on her face, his heart gave a little lurch, and he picked her up, tears making his eyes sting. "At least I know I'm doing something right," he said. "We're going to be fine, don't you worry, sweetheart. If I have to, I'll strap you to my chest and take you everywhere with me."

"That doesn't sound good," Connie said, stepping into the kitchen and

looking around. "What happened in here?"

"Clarissa decided that I needed her to take care of Gracie so badly that she didn't need to do her job," he said. "Then she had the guts to ask me for a raise. There must be something wrong with her. First, she's throwing herself at me, then the next thing I know, she's acting like a.....I had to fire her, I didn't have any choice."

"No, I don't think you did," Connie said. "I stopped by the mailbox and picked up the mail. I'm just going to set it over here on the table, and then I'll help you get this mess cleaned up. You'll feel better when things are back to normal."

He snorted, "I have no idea what normal is anymore," he said. "But I'm glad you're here."

Connie set down the bundle in her hands and walked over to him, "I'm glad I'm here too," she said, then stretched up and kissed him, leaving his body tingling just a little. "It's going to be fine, Mitchell, we'll figure something out."

Connie

Once order was restored in the kitchen, Connie chased Mitchell out of the room, "Go take a shower," she said. "That's the one thing Clarissa was right about, you do smell like a horse."

"But I still have no idea what I'm going to cook for dinner," he said. "I'll shower after I figure it out."

"I'll handle dinner," she said, giving him a gentle shove toward the door. "You can help me when you're done, and there are always dishes afterward."

"Are you sure?" he asked. "What about Gracie?"

"I think I can handle both," she said. "Now, will you go before I change my mind and go home?"

He pulled her into his arms and gave her a big kiss, "We make a pretty good team," he said. "I wonder why I never noticed that before."

"Probably because you were too busy arguing with me," she said, grinning up at him. "I like this much better."

"Me too," he said. "Maybe later I can show you just how much."

He left her blushing, her heart pounding in her chest, and a throbbing need unlike anything she'd ever felt before, and if it hadn't been for Gracie, she probably would have followed him. Instead, after checking on the baby,

her body still humming with desire, she found what she needed to throw together her favorite pasta dish, and got to work, all too aware that somewhere in the house Mitchell was naked in the shower. Cursing the path of her thoughts, still not ready to take that next step, she reminded herself how much was at stake and forced herself to think about something else.

Satisfied that dinner was well under control when she had the pasta boiling on the front of the stove and the sauce simmering in the back, she went to the cabinet, got down two pasta bowls and carried them over to the table. She grabbed the stack of mail to move it, but didn't have a good grip and it all went tumbling to the floor, fanning out in all directions on the slick tiles. Getting down on her hands and knees, she began scooping it all together, but a large manila envelope with her name on it caught her attention, and a sinking feeling spread through her when she saw the return address.

After picking everything up but the envelope, she carried the pile over to the desk, then walked back over and stood staring down at it for a long time, afraid to open it, afraid not to. When she couldn't stand it any longer, she grabbed the envelope, tore it open, slid out the stack of papers, her hands beginning to tremble as she turned the pages, and the reality of what she was reading slowly sank in. She was shaking her head by the time she got to the last page, but when she saw the signatures at the bottom, her disbelief slowly faded, replaced by an intense feeling of betrayal, and the papers fluttered to the floor.

Stumbling over to the table, she sank into a chair, her mind whirling, her emotions making crazy swings between anger, hurt, and confusion. Tears filled her eyes, stinging as they bubbled over and spilled down her cheeks, but she couldn't cry, was wounded past the point that they would help, and as she sat staring out the window, she realized that her dream clinic was never going to happen. A fresh wave of despair threatened to take her under, but just then Mitchell came walking into the kitchen, his hair still wet from the shower.

"Wow, something smells good, I don't know how you do it," he said, then saw her sitting at the table and rushed over to her. "Connie, what's wrong?"

She couldn't answer, couldn't bring herself to say the words, but let him pull her out of the chair and into his arms. "Hey, look at me," he said, smoothing the hair back from her face and tipping her chin up. "Whatever it

is, I'm right here to help you through it. We make a good team, remember."

The tenderness in his eyes spoke to something deep inside her, the concern on his face tipped the scales, and the sobs finally erupted from deep in her chest, and she gave herself over to them. When the worst of the pain had been washed away with her tears, she took several deep breaths and looked up at Mitchell, embarrassed by her outburst, but still not sure she could talk about it.

"I'm sorry, I think I got your shirt wet," she said, trying to pull away from him. "I didn't mean to cry all over you."

"Hold on, you're not going anywhere," he said, pulling her more firmly into his arms. "Do you want to tell me what that was all about?"

She looked up at him, felt her chin begin to tremble, then shook her head, "I don't think I'm ready to talk about it," she said, then looked down at the papers on the floor. "Someone who I thought loved me and cared about what I wanted just showed me that it was all just talk. You might as well read it for yourself."

Just then the pasta started boiling over, "Oh, no, dinner," she said, wiping the last of her tears away. "It's going to be ruined."

Needing a few minutes to get control of her emotions, she untangled herself from Mitchell's arms and rushed over to the stove, glad to have something to distract her. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw him pick up the pages and begin to read, but she ignored him, tossing together a salad and putting rolls into a basket with a little bowl of butter. When everything was ready, she carried it over to the table, set it down with a flourish, then collapsed into a chair, realizing that her appetite was completely gone.

Mitchell got up from where he was sitting, came over, sat down next to her, and pulled her into his arms. "I'm sorry, Connie," he said. "I wish there was something I could do to fix this."

"You probably think I'm upset about the money, and I am, but not for the reasons you think," she said with a sigh. "I was going to open my own clinic with my trust fund money. I was going to offer low-cost services so that everyone, even in small towns, could afford to have their animals treated. There was so much I wanted to do with that money, things that would help both people and animals, but that's not the worst part. I thought my grandparents supported me. I thought they understood how important this is to me. They've always been there for me, told me that someday I'd have the freedom to make my dreams come true, and now they've taken it all away."

“Oh, sweetheart, I’m so sorry,” he said. “I think it’s just awful what they’re doing to you. Maybe you should go see them, see if you can get them to change their minds. We’d be okay here without you for a few days.”

“This is my mother’s doing,” she said, shaking her head. “Talking to them isn’t going to do any good, because she’s the one behind this. She’s the one who keeps pushing the husband and kids thing. She thinks a woman is only worthy of respect if she has a rich husband and a bunch of babies. My father just wants to sell me to the highest bidder to make more money. I’m not going back there, Mitchell, not ever again. If they want to cut me off, that’s fine. I’ll find a way to get what I want without them.”

CHAPTER 15



*** MITCHELL ***

“That’s the fighter I know,” Mitchell said, pulling Connie closer. “We’ll find a way to get your clinic open. I’m sure there are other options besides your trust fund, we’ll just have to be more creative.”

“You keep saying we,” Connie said, looking up at him. “This isn’t your problem, Mitchell, you have enough going on without taking on my problems too.”

“What’s one more challenge,” he said, shrugging his shoulders. “Besides, it’s not a completely selfless offer. I was hoping to keep you around for a while, and helping you open a clinic here would do the trick.”

The first smile he’d seen in a while slowly spread across Connie’s face, “Why is it that when I’m around you, I feel like everything is okay, even when it’s not?” she asked, shaking her head. “Thank you, Mitchell. It’s nice to know that I’ve got someone on my side.”

“I’ve never told you this before because.....well, you know.....” he said. “But you’re a great veterinarian, one of the best I’ve ever worked with, and it would be a shame for that talent to be wasted. We’ll find a way to get you that clinic, Connie. It might take a little longer than you like, but we’ll make it happen. Now, how about we eat some of this dinner you made? It’s been making my stomach growl since you put it on the table.”

They ate in silence for a few minutes. He could see that Connie was only pushing the food around on her plate, but he understood why she was upset. He just wished more than ever he could fix it for her. It was a surprise to discover that her pain made him hurt too, that he could feel the sting of betrayal and the frustration of not being heard, but he could only suffer in silence with her, which added to his feelings of helplessness.

He looked over at the papers sitting on the table, then reached out and pulled them to him, "Maybe we can find a loophole," he said, starting to read them over again. "We could ask Penelope to take a look, she might find something."

"I think it's spelled out pretty clearly," she said, shaking her head. "I don't get any money until I've been married for two years and have a baby, like I'm breeding stock or something."

Bypassing most of the legal jargon, he turned to the page that listed what Connie would have to do to get the money and read over the list again, an idea beginning to form in his head. He sat back and studied her for a second when he was finished, letting the plan swirl around in his head, then let his magic flare just to be sure that he was right, smiling when the answer hit him like a punch in the gut.

"There is one way you could beat them and get what you want," he said, looking over at her, his heart beginning to pound. "We could get married."

Connie jumped up from the table so fast her chair went clattering to the ground, "Did you just suggest we get married?" she asked, staring at him open mouthed. "That's a crazy idea.....we barely know each other..... there's Gracie to think about. We couldn't....."

"It's not a crazy idea, it wouldn't have to be a real marriage," he said, knowing he was lying. "We could just pretend to make your parents happy. It doesn't say anything in there about who you have to marry, just that you have to get married."

"What about the having a baby part?" she asked. "I can't pretend to have a baby, and knowing my parents, they'd want to see the marriage license anyway."

"So, we get married for real," he said, standing up and walking over to her. "Just think about it, this could work for both of us. You need to be married, and I need someone to help me with Gracie. It's the perfect solution, and who knows, you might like being married to me. Some people say I'm a pretty great guy."

"You are serious," Connie said, still staring at him. "I can't believe it."

"Well, you'd better," he said. "Because I'm not going to ask you again."

"You didn't ask me in the first place," she shot back at him, confusing him. "You just threw it out there like you were suggesting we go to the movies."

He burst out laughing, making her scowl at him, "What the hell, I might

as well do this right,” he said, then got down on one knee. “Connie Delmonico, will you marry me?”

“I didn’t mean.....Mitchell, you didn’t have to.....” she stammered, but he was sure he saw tears in her eyes. “Oh, fine, I’ll say yes, but only if you promise me this is just so my mother will leave me alone. When the time is up, we’re both free to go, no strings attached. And we’re not having sex. You’d better just know that now, sex is not part of the deal.”

“Well.....I guess I can agree with that stipulation,” he said. “But I’m not going to promise that I won’t try.”

“That’s not going to work,” she said. “You have to promise.”

“I never make promises I can’t keep,” he said, shaking his head. “Are you going make me crouch down here all night or give me an answer?”

“Okay, yes, I’ll marry you,” she said, going easily into his arms when he stood up. “But we’re not having a big wedding. Let’s just do this quietly. I don’t want everyone talking about us.”

“Whatever you say, sweetheart,” he said, feeling like celebrating. “I just want you to be happy.”

Connie

Mitchell pulled Connie to a stop on the courthouse steps, “Are you sure this is how you want to do this?” he asked. “We could throw something better together in a few days. After all, this might be the only wedding you ever have.”

She looked up into his eyes, “It just makes more sense to do it quickly and get it over with,” she said, unable to tell him that a real wedding would make it seem too real. “We’re going to have to do enough pretending as it is. Why go through all the hassle of a wedding when we’re just getting married because it helps both of us?”

Mitchell studied her for a second, “You just go on believing that,” he said, shrugging his shoulders. “Before we go inside, there’s a little issue with the rings.”

“Oh, no I didn’t even think about that,” she said. “What are we going to do? We can’t get married without rings, can we?”

“Well, lucky for you, we won’t have to worry about that,” he said, pulling a velvet covered box out of his pocket. “I just happen to have the perfect thing right here.”

He popped the box open, revealing a woman's wedding set, a single men's ring nestled next to it, "Oh, Mitchell, they're beautiful," she said, then looked up at him. "Where did you get them? They look old."

"They belonged to my parents, and before that my grandparents. They've been in my father's family for generations. I inherited them when they were killed in a car accident the year I turned twelve," he said. "When I married Darlene, something told me not to give them to her, so I've kept them locked up since then, but a few months ago, I pulled them out to have them cleaned, and I never got around to sending them back."

"Mitchell, I can't.....I mean, these are important.....you can't give them to me....." she said, shaking her head, close to tears. "I'm not the one who is supposed to be wearing them....."

"Now that's where you're wrong," he said. "You're exactly the right person to be wearing them. I want you to have them, and I want you to wear them for as long as you want to."

Before she could argue, he pulled the engagement ring out of the box and slipped it onto her finger, "Oh, it fits perfectly," she said, her head a little fuzzy when she looked up at him and a wave of emotions hit her. "This makes it feel so real, it scares me a little."

Mitchell studied her for a second, "It's only as real as we want it to be," he said, taking her hands in his. "I won't lie to you, Connie, there's a part of me that wants this to be real, but I know it's too soon for that, so I'm going to be patient and hope that you feel the same way one day."

"Oh, Mitchell, don't say that," she said, tears sliding down her cheeks. "I don't want to break your heart. Maybe we shouldn't do this."

"How about you let me worry about my heart," he said, grinning at her. "And don't start nagging me already, we haven't even gotten married yet."

"I'm not nagging you," she said, then started laughing when she realized he was kidding.

Just then Penelope came running up, "Are you really getting married?" she asked, slightly out of breath. "I keep thinking I heard the message wrong. Where's Gracie?"

"She's with Tommy back at the house," Mitchell said. "We decided not to bring her."

"So, you're really doing this?" Penelope asked again, then gasped when Mitchell lifted her hand and showed Penelope the ring. "Oh my gosh, you are doing this."

“Look, we’ll explain after we see the Judge,” Mitchell said. “But we need a witness. Will you do the honors?”

“Of course, I’d love to,” Penelope said, giving them both a hug. “This has been coming for a long time. Josie is going to be so sorry she missed it.”

“Josie,” Mitchell said, his eyes focused on a spot in the distance over Penelope’s shoulder.

“Yes, Josie, you remember her,” Penelope said. “You’ve worked with her for years now.”

“No, he means Josie is here,” she said, turning Penelope around. “And it looks like she’s got Gracie with her.”

“And she looks mad. You two are in big trouble,” Penelope said. “I’ll just wait for you over here.”

“Penelope Garcia, come take this baby,” Josie said when she got close enough, then stomped over to them. “Would one of you like to explain what’s going on around here?”

“We’re getting married,” Mitchell said. “I’m sure glad you could make it. Now we have our other witness.”

Josie’s mouth popped open, “I was sure that Tommy had it wrong, sure that the two of you weren’t really doing something this.....” her words trailed off, and she shook her head. “Okay, someone had better explain and fast. I’ve been pushing you two together, but.....”

She looked over at Mitchell, “My family threatened to cut me off if I don’t get married,” she said. “Mitchell can’t take care of Gracie by himself, so we just thought that this way we could both get what we needed. It might seem a little crazy, but we’ve got it all figured out. It’s only for two years, and then we’ll both go our own way. It’s a good idea, Josie, you have to see that.”

“What I see are a couple of idiots,” Josie said, then looked at Mitchell. “You and I have to have a little talk, come with me.”

Mitchell leaned down and gave her a kiss on the cheek, “I’ll be right back,” he said. “Don’t get cold feet on me while I’m gone.”

CHAPTER 16



*** MITCHELL ***

Mitchell followed Josie, watching her stomp across the grass, dreading the conversation they were about to have. “Does she know?” she asked, then shook her head. “Of course, she doesn’t know. I shouldn’t have even asked.”

“You say that like she wouldn’t marry me if she did,” he said. “Is that what you think?”

“I think you should give her the choice,” she said, then looked over at him. “Unless you’re really planning this no strings attached thing.”

“Well, no, that wasn’t part of my plan,” he said, feeling a little sheepish. “I just thought it would be easier to tell her once she figures out that she’s in love with me.”

“Oh, so that’s how it is,” Josie said, shaking her head. “You’re going to make her fall in love with you. Why do I think that’s not going to go so well?”

“She’s already in love with me,” he said, shrugging his shoulders. “And I love her, so I’m not too worried about that part.”

“Well, congratulations,” Josie said. “But have you thought about what’s going to happen when she finds out that you’re a wolf shifter? Not everyone is open minded about things like that, Mitchell, I don’t want to see you get hurt.”

“That’s not going to happen,” he said, shaking his head. “She’ll understand, I know she will.”

Josie studied him for a second, “You really believe that, don’t you?” she asked. “I need to know, Mitchell, that’s the only way I can support this.”

“I feel it deep down in a place I never knew existed,” he said, looking

over Connie. “She’s meant to be mine, and I’m meant to be hers. I couldn’t accept that before, but Gracie has made me see life completely differently.”

Josie let out a long sigh, “Well, then, let’s go get you two married,” she said. “I just hope this doesn’t blow up in your face, and take my advice, tell her as soon as you can, don’t let this come between you, and it will if you don’t.”

He leaned over and gave the older woman a kiss on the cheek, “Thank you, Josie,” he said. “I really am glad that you didn’t miss this.”

When they walked into the courthouse, he led Connie down the long hallway to the very back of the building, her hand clasped tightly in his, a little bit afraid she was going to change her mind. She glanced up at him as they approached the big window where a clerk was sitting behind a computer, a look of anticipation and excitement on her face. He gave her a big smile, and squeezed her hand in reassurance, the reality of what they were doing hitting home when he heard Gracie gurgling happily behind them.

“Hi, Marilee, thanks for getting this all together for me so quickly,” he said when they got to the window. “I know you have a lot on your plate, I owe you one.”

“Anything in the name of love,” she said, looking back and forth between them. “It was such a surprise when you called. No one knew that the two of you were even dating, and now here you are, getting married.”

“Well, you know how it is,” Connie said, her voice shaking a little. “When you know you’ve found the right one, what’s the point in waiting.”

Marilee studied her for second, then shook her head, “You’re braver than I am, taking on a man and a baby all at once,” she said. “Especially one that isn’t yours. I mean, she’s a cute thing and all, but.....”

“Actually, Gracie is the reason we’re together now,” Connie said. “If it wasn’t for her coming into our lives, we never would have realized that we’re perfect for each other, and now she’ll have a mother and a father.”

“Oh, yes, of course.....I didn’t mean.....” Marilee stammered, then started hunting around on her desk. “Here is all the paperwork. I just need you to sign on the top line, you’ll sign the bottom one after the ceremony.”

After they’d both signed where she’d pointed, Marilee put her stamp on the marriage certificate, then handed it back to them, “Just go on down the hall and knock on the judge’s door; he’s expecting you,” she said. “I’m so happy for both of you. The three of you are going to make an adorable little family.”

Mitchell handed the paperwork over to Connie, then leaned in closer to Marilee, “Just between us, it might not be that little of a family for that long,” he said, a big smile on his face. “But don’t tell anyone I said that, you know how people talk.”

“Oh, I would never,” Marilee said, trying to sound indignant at the idea. “I hate people that gossip.”

When they walked away, Connie elbowed him in the ribs, “Marilee is the biggest gossip in town,” she said. “Why on Earth would you tell her that? It will be everywhere before we’re even done with the judge.”

“Yeah, and just think how embarrassing it will be for her when everyone figures out that you’re not pregnant,” he said, laughing. “It’s what she deserves for gossiping about everyone.”

Connie groaned, “Like they weren’t already going to be talking about us,” she said, then started to smile. “Okay, maybe it is a little funny. How long do you think it will take everyone to figure it out?”

“I don’t know, what to make a bet?” he said. “I give them a month.”

“Oh, it will take longer than that,” she said. “I’ll go with six weeks.”

“Good, it’s a bet then,” he said. “Winner gets to choose their prize.”

“Wait, I didn’t agree to that,” Connie said, but he was already knocking on the door. “Mitchell, I don’t know what you’re thinking, but forget it.”

“Sorry, sweetheart, a bet is a bet,” he said, grinning at her. “You’re not going to back out on me already, are you?”

Connie

It had taken all the way to the end of the wedding vows for the truth to hit Connie. She was in love with Mitchell, and marrying him was a huge mistake. Her head swam with the realization that what he saw as a fake marriage had become real to her, and a wave of panic washed through her. She’d opened herself up to heartbreak, vowed to love and cherish a man who didn’t feel the same way she did, a man who just wanted her to take care of his child.

She was just about to tell everyone that she’d changed her mind, but the Judge’s voice broke through, “Then by the power vested in me by the state of Montana, I declare you husband and wife,” he said, a big grin on his face. “You may kiss the bride, young man.”

Mitchell looked down at her, their eyes met, and her heart melted when

she saw that his had tears in them. The panic faded, and her doubts were swept away, replaced by a warmth that spread through her. When his mouth came down on hers it wasn't in the chaste kiss that she had expected, but in one so tender and powerful that her head began to swim as she began to lose herself in the passion that blossomed between them.

She was a bit unsteady on her feet when he finally let her go, and she clung to him for a second, aware of the hushed silence around them, then looked around, a little embarrassed. The judge was still smiling, Penelope was staring at them, shocked, and Josie was shaking her head and whispering to Gracie, a pleased look on her face. After they thanked the judge and added their signatures to the marriage license again, Mitchell led them all out of the judge's chambers.

"Congratulations," Penelope said, hugging them both. "What are we going to do to celebrate?"

"We didn't plan anything," she said. "We just thought we'd go back home and make some lunch. We'd love it if you would join us."

"That's it?" Penelope asked. "This is your wedding day, we should at least go out to lunch, even if the diner is our only choice. I insist, it will be my treat."

Mitchell looked down at her, "What do you think?" he asked. "Are you ready to face the town and all the gossips as a married couple?"

She thought about it for a second, "I guess the sooner we get it over with, the better," she said. "But if I hear you telling anyone else that I might be pregnant, I'm leaving."

Mitchell laughed, "Okay, that's a deal," he said. "Besides, Marilee will have already spread it all over town."

"You told Marilee that Connie was pregnant," Josie said. "Mitchell, that was a terrible thing to do."

"But she deserves it," he said, shrugging his shoulders. "She's the worst gossip in town and you know it."

Josie just shook her head, "She can't help it," she said, then a little smile appeared on her face. "It is kind of funny, she's going to look silly when everyone finds out it's not true."

"My plan exactly," Mitchell said. "I'm hoping it will make her think twice about spreading stories about other people."

The diner was crowded when they walked in, but that wasn't what took them so long to get to a table, it was stopping at almost every table to accept

congratulations from the other diners. Mitchell was as surprised as she was by the outpouring of genuine happiness for them, and she was a bit breathless by the time they sat down and the waitress brought them menus. They'd heard a lot of I knew it's, and it was only a matter of times, and nearly everyone had said how perfect they were for each other. It was all a bit overwhelming, and she had no idea how to react.

"That wasn't what I expected," he said, taking her hand under the table. "I didn't think everyone would be so happy for us, I thought.....well..... they were going to be nasty about it."

She finally looked over at him, "They all seemed to think it was inevitable, that we're supposed to be together," she said, bracing herself for his answer. "I mean, that's kind of.....crazy, right?"

It took Mitchell a second to answer, "Well.....a few weeks ago, I might have thought it was a little crazy, but I'm beginning to wonder if they're right," he said, looking into her eyes. "Would that really be so bad?"

This time she hesitated, afraid to tell him how she really felt, "No, I guess not," she said, feeling her cheeks turning pink. "Now that you're not such a jerk, I could get used to having you around."

"Oh, really?" he asked, grinning at her. "I will admit I have been enjoying kissing you instead of fighting with you. In fact, I might have to do it right now."

"Mitchell, we're in the middle of the diner," she said, leaning away from him. "Don't you dare."

"Oh, now you're in trouble," he said, pulling her into his arms. "I can't pass up a dare."

"I didn't dare you," she said. "Mitchell....."

His mouth came down on hers, cutting off her words, and it was only a few seconds before she gave into the desire that suddenly coursed through her veins. When he finally let her go, they were both breathless, and her body was throbbing in places that were highly inappropriate for a public restaurant. For a few seconds all she could do was stare up at him, her head too fuzzy with pleasure for her brain to work, but she didn't miss the fact that Mitchell was grinning like he'd just won the lottery.

"This just gets better and better every time I kiss you," he said, then leaned over and whispered in her ear. "I can't wait to see what happens when you finally let me into your bed."

She gasped, her entire body began to throb, and if they hadn't been in the

middle of a restaurant, she would have thrown herself into his arms. “Mitchell..... we’re not.....I didn’t think.....” she let out a long sigh, battling with herself. “If we.....do that.....it will change everything.”

“I’ve thought of that,” he said, grinning at her. “The way I see it, it will only make it better.”

She groaned, her body tingling with anticipation, “You’re making this very difficult,” she said. “You make it sound so easy, so simple, but you know it’s not.”

“It’s only hard if we make it that way,” Mitchell said. “But I’m not going to push you, Connie. I’ll be here when you’re ready, just say the word, and I’m yours.”

CHAPTER 17



*** MITCHELL ***

“If you two are done playing kissy face, some of us would like to get on with lunch,” Josie said, breaking the spell and making Mitchell wish they had just gone home for lunch. “I don’t know what happened to our waitress. She should have been back by now.”

“I’ll go find her,” he said, giving Connie a quick kiss on the lips. “I’ll be right back.”

He wound his way through the crowd, searching for the waitress, then spotted her behind the counter, but before he could take more than a couple of steps, he ran into Taylor. “Oh, hey, sorry, didn’t mean to barrel into you like that,” he said. “I was looking for our waitress, but she got lost somewhere.”

Taylor studied him with unapproving eyes, “I hear congratulations are in order,” he finally said. “You’ve certainly set the record for the shortest time being a single dad. I don’t know whether to congratulate you or not.”

A bit shocked, he stared at the man for a few seconds, ready to tear into him, but took a deep breath instead, “Hey man, that sounded a bit judgmental,” he said. “You don’t know anything about my life, but I can promise you that I didn’t marry Connie just to have someone to help me take care of Gracie, if that’s what you’re getting at.”

“You’re right, it’s none of my business, but I have to warn you, I’ve seen this happen too many times,” Taylor said, softening a bit. “I guess it frustrates me watching men rushing into marriage just because they’re suddenly a single father. Most of the time it doesn’t go well and everyone ends up hurt, including the kids. That’s why I started the club, to give men like us a support system so we don’t have to resort to marriage as a way to

cope with the situation.”

He let out a long sigh, “I guess I can understand where you’re coming from, and I will admit, it is nice to know that I’ve got someone to share the burden of raising Gracie,” he said. “But that’s not why I married Connie. She’s an amazing woman, and we’ve been skirting around the attraction between us for a long time, years if you want to know the truth. I know what it must look like to you, but I’m in love with her, and I think she loves me, so I think we’ll be okay.”

“Well, how about that?” Taylor said, shaking his head. “Maybe happy endings really do happen, if so, I’m happy for you.”

“Thanks, we’ve got a little way to go before we get to that happy ending, but that will be half the fun,” he said. “I want to thank you for all the help, and I really would have enjoyed being part of the club, but I guess……I’m married now. Wow, that still feels a little strange.”

Taylor laughed, “We’ve been known to make exceptions to the rules in the past,” he said. “And I think this might be one of those times. You should come by on Saturday, you won’t be the only married dad there.”

“I’d like that,” he said. “Gracie and I will see you then.”

When he got back to the table, their food was already there, and Connie had an anxious look on her face, “You were gone for a long time,” she said. “I ordered for you; I hope it’s okay.”

“I’m sorry, I ran into Taylor,” he said. “The guy from the single dad’s group. He and I had a little chat, and if it’s okay with you, I’d like to go to the meeting on Saturday.”

She looked a little surprised, “Mitchell, you don’t have to ask me to do things,” she said. “I don’t want this to work that way. If you want to go, you should go. Besides, I think it would be good for you and Gracie.”

“You wouldn’t mind?” he asked. “We’d be gone all morning.”

“I think I can find plenty to keep me busy while you’re off with your friends,” she said, taking his hand. “Mitchell, we still have to have our own lives, things we do without each other. Just because we’re married, that doesn’t mean we won’t still have our own interests.”

He thought back to his other relationships, the way the women had tried to control his life, “Well, okay then,” he said, a smile spreading across his face as Connie burrowed her way deeper into his heart. “In that case, I’m going to have poker night on Monday, bowling on Wednesday, and football on Thursday and Sunday. Am I leaving anything out?”

She slapped him on the chest, “Very funny,” she said. “Now eat your lunch before it gets cold. Your daughter is looking a little tired, we should get her home soon.”

“I like the sound of that,” he said, grinning at her. “The only question I have is your place or mine.”

“Oh, I didn’t think about that,” Connie said, a look of worry on her face. “It would probably look funny if we don’t live together, but.....”

“How about if we move you up to the big house,” he said. “You could take the bedroom next to mine. There’s a connecting door, no one would have to know.”

Connie relaxed a little, “This might be harder to pull off than I thought,” she said, earning a snort from Josie. “But we’ll make it work, unless someone has a better idea.”

“You could just stop pretending and tell each other the truth,” Josie said, then shook her head. “Never mind, I should mind my own business.”

“What’s she talking about?” Connie asked, looking over at Mitchell. “Is there something I should know?”

He shook his head, “No, Josie just always thinks she knows best,” he said, shooting her a dirty look. “And it really isn’t any of her business.”

Connie

Connie woke the next morning and stumbled into the kitchen, her eyes bleary from lack of sleep, her brow furrowed with frustration. She headed right for the coffee pot and poured herself a cup. Mitchell came dragging in a few minutes later, the baby gurgling happily in his arms, but he looked anything but happy, and for a second, she was glad. The man had tormented her all night long, invading her thoughts so deeply that she’d spent the entire night tossing and turning, dreaming of his touch, his kisses, and more.

She’d finally woke deeply unsatisfied, a burning need deep in her belly, and blamed Mitchell for awakening something inside her that she was afraid only he could satisfy. It was a new and scary feeling to be drawn to him so strongly, frightening to think about where it might lead, and alarming that it was becoming more and more difficult to resist. Anger seemed like the safest emotion in the morning light, the only way not to give into the urge to kiss him until he carried her off and made good on the promise she felt in his kisses.

“I didn’t sleep at all last night,” she said. “And it’s all your fault.”

“Well, join the club,” he shot back at her. “And I’d like to point out that I’m not the only one to blame. Do you always wear perfume to bed? The smell drove me crazy all night.”

“I did not wear perfume to bed,” she said. “That’s ridiculous.”

“Oh, so now I’m ridiculous,” he said, glaring at her. “I’m not the one who sighed all night long like she was.....”

“I wasn’t.....I did not.....” she stammered, her cheeks getting hot. “How dare you suggest.....well, I’m not sure what you were suggesting, but I know it wasn’t good.”

“I think that’s enough for little ears, and maybe even big ones,” Josie said. “I’m going to take Gracie out to the porch and give her a bottle. She and I need some time to get to know each other. The two of you need to figure this out and fast. Either you are or you aren’t, this in between thing isn’t going to work. I won’t have you two bickering like a couple of children every day.”

When the door closed behind Josie, they stared at each other for several long minutes, and she could already feel the passion between them building. Turning away, she poured him a cup of coffee, then took it over to him, “I’m sorry, Connie,” he said, taking the cup. “I don’t even know what we were fighting about.”

She sighed, “I was mad at you because I couldn’t sleep last night,” she said, taking a few steps away from him. “I shouldn’t have taken it out on you. I’m sorry too.”

Mitchell set down the cup and pulled her into his arms, then let out a long sigh of his own, “That feels better,” he said, then looked down at her. “Doesn’t it?”

She nodded reluctantly, “Yes, and that’s what scares me,” she said. “I don’t know what I want anymore, my mind tells me one thing, but my body seems to have a completely different agenda.”

“We’re back where we started, aren’t we?” he asked. “We always seem to end up in this same place.”

“It’s my fault, I’m sorry,” she said. “This is all so confusing. I thought I had my life all figured out, then suddenly there you are, in my way, mixing me up and making me question everything. This wasn’t supposed to happen.”

“No, it wasn’t,” he said. “But now that it has, we have to make a choice, take a leap of faith or stumble backward until the something special we share

gets trampled into nothing.”

“And if I chose a leap of faith?” she asked.

“I’ll be there holding your hand the entire time,” he said, then smiled at her. “Let’s have dinner together tonight, just the two of us, candlelight, flowers, the whole nine yards.”

“You mean like a date?” she asked, hating that she liked the idea.

“That’s exactly what I mean,” he said. “I’m sure that Josie will watch Gracie for us. A little time alone might be just what we need.”

“That sounds dangerous to me,” she said, shaking her head. “Maybe the last thing we need is time alone. That always leads somewhere that scares me.”

“Just remember I’ll be right there holding your hand,” he said. “Tonight, eight o’clock, my cabin. I’ll take care of everything; you just show up.”

Before she could answer, her cell phone began ringing, “Saved by the bell,” she said, slipping out of his arms. “I’d better get that; it could be important.”

It was a number she didn’t recognize, but she picked it up anyway, “This is Dr. Delmonico,” she answered. “How can I help you?”

“You can start by explaining what this marriage license is that I’m holding in my hand. It looks to me like you got married yesterday, and I know that can’t be right,” her mother said. “I don’t know what you’re up to, young lady, but it isn’t going to work. You’re going to come back home and marry a suitable man. I thought you would have gotten that message by now.”

She looked over at Mitchell, then pressed the speaker button on the phone, “I’m afraid that’s not possible. I’m already married, Mother,” she said. “Besides, I thought that’s what you wanted, me married and having babies, I’m just giving you what you want.”

“Oh my God, are you pregnant already?” her mother asked. “Who is this man?”

“He’s my boss, Mom,” she said. “We’ve been seeing each other for a while. I didn’t tell you because I knew that you wouldn’t approve.”

“You are pregnant! This is horrible, this is not what I wanted, young lady,” she said. “You were supposed to marry someone from your own social circle, not some dirty cowboy. I’m never going to live this down at the club, no one will ever speak to me again.”

“I’m not pregnant, we’re not planning to have children right away, and

he's not a dirty cowboy; he runs the ranch, Mother," she said. "Mitchell already has a three-month-old daughter, her mother doesn't want her, so we're going to raise her together. You're a grandmother, aren't you thrilled?"

She could hear her mother sputtering on the other end of the line, "What did you just say?" she finally screeched. "Never mind, don't you dare repeat it, your father and I are coming out there. We're going to put a stop to this nonsense. I don't care if the man owns a ranch, you're coming home with us."

"No, I'm not, this is where I want to be," she said. "And now there's nothing you can do about it. I'm married to Mitchell and I'm going to stay that way, and once I officially adopt Gracie, I'll be a mother, so the trust fund will be mine. You were a little lax on the details. I'm surprised your attorneys didn't catch that."

There was another long pause, "I see. I just want to remind you who your father is and how much power he holds in the palm of his hand," her mother said, a hard edge to her voice. "And I'm going to use every bit of it to destroy your marriage. You belong to us, Connie, you will do what we say, or you'll be sorry."

CHAPTER 18



*** MITCHELL ***

Mitchell looked over at Connie, saw that her face had turned completely white, and took the phone out of her hand. “Well, it sounds like I’m going to get to meet your parents,” he said, grinning at her. “They seem like such nice people; I can’t wait until they get here.”

“Mitchell, this isn’t funny,” she said. “My mother is vicious; you don’t want to be in the same house with her. We can’t let them come here.”

He guided her over to the couch in front of the fireplace and made her sit down, then joined her, “Do we have any choice?” he asked, putting his arm around her. “You had to know this was a possibility.”

“I guess I should have. My mother always has to have her way, but this is over the top even for her,” she said, shaking her head. “I figured she’d have the marriage license checked out, I even thought that she might send one of her people to spy on us a little, but I never dreamed she’d come here herself.”

“Her people?” he asked. “What kind of people are we talking about?”

“Informants, I guess you could call them,” she said. “She’s got a whole network of them spread across the city. She uses the information they give her to control people.”

“Blackmail?” he asked, a look of surprise on his face. “I didn’t think.....”

“She’s not a nice person, Mitchell,” she said. “She’ll do anything in her power to break us up, and if she gets even a hint that we just got married to get around the stipulations in the trust fund.....”

“Then we won’t let that happen,” he said, pulling her close. “This isn’t her territory, Connie, this is ours, and the advantage is ours. By the time she leaves here, she’ll know that she can’t mess with us.”

She looked up at him, her eyes full of hope, “I never thought this would happen. I’m sorry, Mitchell. If I’d known how much grief it was going to cause you, I would have said no when you asked me to marry you,” she said. “I’ll understand if you don’t want to take all this on. You already have Gracie to worry about, and I won’t hold it against you if you want to back out.”

“Not on your life,” he said. “We started this together, and we’re going to finish it together. Just tell me what we have to do, and I’ll do it. I just want you to be happy.”

She studied him for a second, “You really mean that, don’t you,” she said, fighting back tears. “I don’t think anyone has ever cared about me as much as you do.”

“And I always will,” he said, pressing his forehead against hers. “Just remember that when your mother is here and things get rough. I’m right where I want to be, where I’m meant to be.”

* * *

Connie looked over at Mitchell uncertainly, “I don’t know, Mitchell, this seems wrong,” she said, looking around the master bedroom. “Are you sure we shouldn’t call Mr. Templeton and make sure this is okay with him?”

“Then we’d have to explain the whole situation, and that’s not going to be very easy,” he said. “It’s only going to be for a few days. I really don’t think that he’ll mind, and we don’t have much choice if we want your parents to believe that I own the ranch.”

“I guess you’re right. It just seems strange to see all our stuff in here,” she said. “Are you sure you don’t mind sleeping on the pull-out?”

“No, I’ll be fine,” he said. “My back might feel differently, but I’ll ignore it.”

“Oh, Mitchell, I don’t know why you won’t let me sleep there,” she said. “It makes more sense. You don’t have to be the big tough man with me.”

He didn’t want to tell her that he had every intention of sharing the bed with her, “I thought we already settled this,” he said. “Your parents are going to be here any minute, we should get downstairs.”

She looked from the bed to the couch doubtfully, but Josie’s voice carried up the stairs, “There’s a big black SUV pulling into the driveway,” she called. “You two had better get down here.”

He held out his hand, "Come on, it's show time," he said. "Let's do this."

They were waiting on the front porch when the car pulled up, Connie's hand sweaty in his, her breath coming a bit faster than normal. "Take a deep breath, it's going to be okay," he said. "She's just a woman, Connie. She only has as much power as you give her."

She closed her eyes for a second, then opened them and smiled up at him, "You're right," she said. "That's what I'm going to keep telling myself."

When the car came to a stop, the driver jumped out and went to the back door, opened it and held out his hand, then waited as Connie's mother slowly got out of the car. "Thank you, Rupert, stay close by. I might want to leave right away," she said, her eyes sweeping over the ranch house. "Hmm..... better than I expected, but where are the servants?"

"Mother, we don't have servants," Connie said, stepping forward. "If you want someone to wait on you, you're out of luck. Around here we all take care of ourselves."

The woman didn't even hug her daughter, just waved her hand in the air at her, "Oh, I anticipated that little problem, so I brought my own people with me," she said. "They should be along shortly. I hope you have room in this tiny place for them, I'd hate to see them crowded together in some horrible dusty room."

He could see the muscles in Connie's jaw working and stepped up next to her, "I'm Mitchell Stewart. Welcome to With Just a Touch of Luck," he said. "We're happy you could join us for a couple of days. Maybe we should move inside. It's one of those scorching days you only get in Montana."

"I'm sorry, what did all that mean?" her mother sneered. "Just a touch of luck. What does that even mean?"

"It's the name of the ranch, ma'am," he said. "Because that's how I got this place, with a little luck."

Connie's mother studied him for a second, "Ridiculous," she finally said, then turned to Connie's father, who hadn't said a word. "Come along, Fred, stop standing there like an idiot, our daughter and her.....husband have invited us into their home, such as it is."

Connie

Connie was fuming inside, horrified by her mother's behavior, but she took a deep breath, the feel of Mitchell's hand in hers enough to keep her

from doing something she'd regret. Ignoring her mother's moan of disappointment as they led them through the entryway and into the library, she held her tongue, reminding herself that it was only a couple of days.

"Won't you have a seat?" she asked. "I thought we could spend a few minutes chatting before we show you to your room."

"It was an awfully long and grueling trip, I could use something stronger than tea if you have it," her mother said. "A nice glass of whiskey would take the edge off quite nicely."

"I'm sorry, we don't have any alcohol in the house except Josie's cooking wine," he said. "I'm sure there's a liquor store in town. You could send one of your people when they get here."

Her mother made another disapproving sound, "That's no way to treat a guest, but then I don't know what I expected from a.....cowboy," she said, shaking her head, then looked over at her. "Are you finished with this charade, Connie? I don't believe for a second that you married this man, I raised you to want more than this, to expect more."

"You may have raised me that way, but I learned a long time ago that there's more to life than money," she said. "I'm happy here, I like my job, and that's more than enough for me."

A look she didn't like appeared on her mother's face and she quickly tried to figure out what she'd said wrong, hoping to fix it. "Funny, I didn't hear you say anything about your new husband or the child he had with another woman. That's very interesting," her mother said, a little smile on her face. "Do you know what else I find interesting? I find it very intriguing that only days after you received the notification of the changes to your trust fund, you're suddenly in love and married."

She froze for a second, "Mother, what are you trying to say?" she finally asked, trying to sound annoyed but scared to death she'd already seen through their lie. "Just spit it out."

"I think this is fake, I think you married this.....man just to get your trust fund," her mother said. "Do you think I don't know how much you want that stupid clinic? I've tried and tried to put you on the right path, but you just won't cooperate. Now I'm going to have to play dirty. I'm going to prove that you entered into this marriage under false pretenses and have it annulled. No daughter of mine is going to marry a man like him."

"Mother, now you're being ridiculous," she said, getting to her feet. "Maybe this visit was a bad idea."

“Now you’re kicking me out?” her mother screeched. “That proves that I’m right! You don’t want me here because I’ll find out the truth.”

“I can assure you that we were married legally by a judge yesterday,” he said, getting to his feet as well. “Feel free to check with the state. I think you’ll find that all the paperwork is in order. Maybe it’s time we showed you to your rooms, I’m sure that you’re tired after the long trip, and I think we all need some time to cool off.”

As soon as the door was closed behind Connie’s parents, she fell into his arms and buried her face in his chest, “It was worse than I expected,” she said into his shirt. “She’s even meaner than she used to be. I’m sorry she was so rude to you, I wanted to slap her several times.”

“Well, I’m glad you didn’t,” he said, stroking Connie’s hair, a smile on his face. “Although it would have made for quite a show. Does your dad ever say anything? I don’t think I heard him say a word the whole time we were sitting there.”

She shook her head, “I think my mother took over his brain years ago,” she said. “I think she nagged and bitched at him until he just gave up, because he didn’t used to be like this. Believe it or not, I can remember when he was fun.”

He pulled back and looked down at her, “Just promise me that you’ll never do that to me,” he said, shrugging his shoulders. “I kinda like having my own opinion.”

“I am not my mother,” she said, insulted. “Don’t even suggest such a thing. You can have all the opinions you want, and I promise I’ll even listen to them.”

“I notice you didn’t say that you’d agree with me,” he said, a little smile on his face. “I’m disappointed.”

“Now you’re taking things too far,” she said, shaking her head. “Besides, things might get boring if we agreed on everything all the time.”

“Oh, I don’t know, that might just leave us some extra time for other things,” he said, lowering his mouth to hers. “Lots of extra time.”

Connie didn’t hear the door to her parents’ room open just a crack, but Mitchell did, and he wrapped his arms around her tighter and deepened the kiss until she moaned. When the door snapped shut, he kissed her a little longer, wanting to prolong the moment, then put his arm around her shoulders and led her back down the stairs without a backward glance, sure that his message had gotten across.

CHAPTER 19



*** MITCHELL ***

Mitchell pulled at the collar of his dress shirt for the hundredth time, feeling like his air supply was being cut off, then turned and began to pace back and forth in the tiny space in front of the fireplace. Of all the things he'd had to put up with from Connie's mother, getting dressed up for dinner was the most annoying. Her threats and insults didn't bother him at all, but wearing a tie crossed a line that left him frustrated and annoyed. It was a ridiculous waste of time, and he had no plans to give in the next night. Once was more than enough for him.

"Will you sit down? You're making me nervous with all that pacing," Josie said from the rocking chair where she was giving Gracie a bottle. "It's just dinner with Connie's snobby parents."

"I'm sorry, Josie, I guess I've got myself all worked up over nothing," he said. "You're the one who should be upset, having all these people in the house must be driving you crazy. They've completely taken over."

"Is that what's bothering you?" she asked. "As far as I'm concerned let them at it. The entire house has been cleaned, and I haven't had to cook or do any dishes since they all got here. It's like a vacation. I just hope Mr. Templeton is okay with all of this, I really wish you would have called him."

"They'll be gone in a couple of days and everything will go back to normal," he said. "We just have to make it through this visit, then I'll call him and let him know about Connie and I getting married."

Josie shook her head, "You're going in so many different directions, I don't think you know which way is up," she said. "But it's certainly entertaining to watch."

He opened his mouth to defend himself, but just then Connie walked into

the room, and his mind emptied of everything but her as his body responded to the sight of all her luscious curves on display in a dress that hugged her in all the right places. He'd grown so accustomed to only seeing her in jeans and tee-shirts, a white coat thrown over the top, so he could only stare as she walked over to him in a pair of heels that made her hips sway as she crossed the room.

A smile spread across her face when she saw him, and his heart skipped a beat, then his entire body filled with warmth. "You look so handsome," Connie said, reaching up to adjust his tie. "But your tie is all crooked. Stop pulling at your collar."

He grabbed both her hands, kissed her palms, then stepped back, "You look amazing," he said, grinning down at her. "It almost makes getting dressed up worth it."

"Almost?" she asked. "That's disappointing."

Pulling her into his arms, he kissed her, then whispered, "It will be worth it if I can get that dress off you later."

Connie gasped, "Mitchell, someone will hear you," she said, her eyes full of desire. "And I can't think when you say things like that."

"Well, we are married, I think I'm allowed," he said, grinning at her. "After all, what's the point if I can't talk dirty to you in the middle of our kitchen?"

Connie's cheeks turned pink, but before she could answer, her mother came into the kitchen, "Connie, where are you?" she called, then saw them across the room. "What are you doing in here with him? Your father and I have been waiting for you in the library for ten minutes. You know we always have drinks before dinner."

"Mother, I already explained that Mitchell and I don't drink and that we'd join you in the dining room for dinner," she said. "Nothing has changed since then. We'll be there in just a few minutes if you want to go get Dad."

"This is completely unacceptable; this is not the way you treat a guest," Connie's mother fumed. "Just because we're out here in the wilderness doesn't mean all decorum should be thrown out the window."

Connie turned around to face her mother and he could feel the tension in her shoulders, "Mother, we are doing our best to accommodate you, but I have to remind you that you weren't invited here," she said. "You chose to come here on your own, and I do believe that it's very bad manners to behave so ungratefully when we graciously opened our doors for you."

Her mother's eyes narrowed and she opened her mouth, then closed it again, turned, and stormed off, leaving them both staring after her. "That went well," he said, pulling Connie up against him and wrapping his arms around her. "I think I'm going to win the prize for most difficult mother-in-law. It's a good thing I'm getting attached to you."

Connie leaned up against him, "We haven't even had dinner and I'm exhausted," she said. "Let's go get this over with so we can go to bed."

"Now that's a plan I can get behind," he said. "Looks like I might get that dress off you after all."

"Mitchell, that's not what I meant," she said, looking up at him over her shoulder. "Behave yourself, I need to be on my toes or my mother will make this meal miserable."

"I was just trying to help. If we want her to believe this marriage is real, we have to act like it," he said. "Unless you can think of a better way, I'd say this is working so far."

She turned around in his arms, "I'm sure you're not enjoying yourself at all," she said. "It's very noble of you to make such a huge sacrifice."

"Well, I am all about sacrificing myself for the greater good," he said, smiling down at her, but when their eyes met and the connection between them began to sing through his blood, he became serious. "But you should know something. You matter a lot to me, and I would do anything for you."

Connie

Connie let her father help her into her chair, watching out of the corner of her eye as Mitchell got her mother settled, then looked up at her father, wondering what happened to the man she used to know. Her father patted her on the shoulder, then took his place at the end of the table opposite her mother but didn't look at her. Instead, he busied himself with his napkin. Feeling a little sorry for him, she turned away, a feeling of loss surprising her, but met Mitchell's eyes across the table and it faded away, replaced by a thrill of desire.

He grinned at her but didn't say anything, "Well, now, here we are," her mother said, looking around the table. "Just the four of us, how cozy."

Before anyone could say anything, the door from the kitchen burst open and a line of servers dressed in black came in, their hands filled with bowls and platters. One by one, they walked around the table, filling plates and then

topping off glasses before disappearing back into the kitchen without saying a word. Mitchell looked at her, his eyes wide with surprise, his face full of amusement, but she just shrugged her shoulders.

“She’s showing off,” she mouthed to him. “Just ignore it.”

“What was that?” her mother asked. “Did you say something?”

“No, I didn’t,” she said, smiling sweetly at her mother. “I know the rules.”

“Rules?” Mitchell mouthed at her, but she shook her head.

It was a relief when Gregory came in carrying a bottle of wine, “Oh, good, the wine is here,” her mother said. “A meal isn’t complete without it.”

Gregory poured a small amount into her mother’s glass, who made a big show of swirling it around before taking a sip. “That will do,” she said, waving her hand in the air. “Thank you.”

Gregory filled her mother’s glass all the way to the top, then moved around to Mitchell, but he reached out and covered his wine glass with his hand, “No, thank you, I’m sure it’s wonderful, but I don’t drink alcohol,” he said. “I’ll just stick with the water.”

Her father downed half his glass as soon as it was poured, then gestured for more before the man moved onto her, “I think I’ll just stick with water, too,” she said. “It’s nice to see you, Gregory.”

“Ma’am,” Gregory said. “You’re looking well; congratulations.”

“Thank you, Gregory, that will be all for now,” her mother said, her voice hard. “We won’t need you until dessert.”

When it was just the four of them again, her mother looked over at Mitchell, her eyes hard, “I’ve never trusted a man who doesn’t drink,” she said. “Are you one of those people who can’t control themselves around alcohol, young man? I have no patience for that kind of lack of control, and I’m telling you right now, I won’t have my daughter married to a drunk.”

“Well, ma’am, since I don’t drink and I never have, it would be awfully difficult for me to be a drunk,” Mitchell said, lifting his water to his lips and taking a sip. “And I would just like to point out that you’re the one who couldn’t go without a drink. You should be careful where you point fingers.”

“How dare you?” her mother demanded. “Connie, make him apologize right this second.”

“He was just pointing out the truth,” she said, shrugging her shoulders. “I don’t see anything wrong with that.”

“I don’t need alcohol,” her mother said, then took a big sip of her wine. “I

don't, so stop looking at me that way. This isn't about me anyway, it's about this man you married. I want to know how much this ranch is worth, and I'm not going to let a dime of our money go to the upkeep of this place. You should know that right now."

Mitchell didn't answer right away, "I don't need or want your money," he finally said, his voice deadly calm. "And I'd like to say that where I come from that statement would be considered very offensive. I didn't marry your daughter for her money, and if you suggest such a thing again, I will ask you to leave my home."

There was a long silence at the table, then her mother started laughing, "Well, aren't we just all prim and proper, telling me about manners? You probably still have cow shit on your boots," she said, then took another big swig of her wine. "This is so ridiculous, I can't believe I'm sitting at this table being insulted by a low-class piece of trash like you, and I've decided that this marriage is over. Connie, you will start packing tonight, you're leaving with us tomorrow."

"Margorie, she's a grown woman, she can do what she wants," her father said from the other end of the table. "Stop acting like a crazy person and eat your dinner. You're not going to win this fight. Can't you see they're perfect for each other?"

She was so shocked it took a second for it to sink in that her father had finally spoken up, "Thanks, Dad," she said, feeling tears in her eyes. "I knew you were in there somewhere."

"What did you just say?" her mother hissed. "Did you just speak against me?"

"You heard me right," her father said, spearing a piece of meat and shoving it in his mouth. "I don't think I stuttered. Leave Connie alone."

Her mother's mouth popped open, her face filled with shock, and she started to sputter and clutched her chest as if she'd been stabbed. "I can't believe it; my own husband has turned against me," she said, dramatically leaning back in her chair. "After all I've done for this family, all the meals I've provided, the shoulders to cry on, this is what I get, total disrespect."

"You mean all the checks you've written to servants and therapists," she said, shaking her head. "Such a huge sacrifice."

"I don't have to listen to this," her mother said, getting to her feet. "You're an ungrateful brat, and I'm going to see to it that you never see a penny of that trust fund money. Let's go Fred, I've lost my appetite."

Her father looked down at his plate of food, then back up at her mother, “You go on ahead, I’m going to finish my dinner,” he said. “I’m done missing meals because something sets you off. Go on up to the room, I’ll be along when I’m finished.”

Her mother’s mouth popped open in shock for the second time that night, and Connie had to stifle a giggle. “Fred, you’d better get up from that table right this instant and come with me,” her mother hissed when she finally recovered. “I mean it, Fred, you have one more second before you have to find someplace else to sleep tonight.”

After considering his plate again, her father looked over at her, “Are there any other bedrooms in this house?” he asked. “It sounds like I’m going to need someplace to sleep tonight.”

CHAPTER 20



*** MITCHELL ***

After Connie's mother stomped out of the dining room, there was a long silence, then Connie's dad took a deep breath, "I'm sorry you had to see that, but it's been a long time coming," he said. "I'll probably end up broke and homeless, but I just can't take it anymore. She's gone completely off her rocker, and I'm not going to be a part of it anymore."

"Oh, Dad, I'm so sorry," Connie said, reaching out and putting her hand on his arm. "I never meant for this to happen, I just wanted my trust fund without having to marry someone I didn't love and having a bunch of kids."

"So, your mother was right?" her father asked, a look of disappointment on his face. "I thought there was something there between you two, but I guess I was wrong. I won't tell her, of course. The truth is I might have done the same thing in your situation."

"Mr. Delmonico, I care about Connie, and she cares about me. That's why we did this," he said, then looked over at her. "And I'm hoping that someday it will become more than just a way for Connie to get her trust fund."

"So, I wasn't wrong," he said, perking up. "And please call me Fred."

"No, Dad, you weren't wrong," Connie said, looking up at him. "But we're taking things slowly. We spent a long time being terrible to each other, and with Gracie here, we just want to be careful that no one gets hurt."

"Oh, the baby," Fred said, sitting up straighter. "I would love to meet her after dinner."

"You would?" he asked, surprised by the man's excitement. "I mean, of course, that would be fine."

"She's my granddaughter; of course, I want to meet her," Fred said.

“Your mother isn’t the only one who wants grandchildren, but I was willing to wait until you were ready.”

“Well, I don’t know if I was ready,” Connie said, laughing. “But you can’t help but fall in love with her, she’s so sweet.”

“Now that we have that settled,” Fred said, looking over at Mitchell. “I want to hear all about the ranch, I’ve never been on one. I really have no idea what goes on around here, it must be a huge responsibility, especially for someone so young. Has the property been in your family for a long time?”

He looked over at Connie and she nodded her head, “Mr. Delmonico..... I mean Fred, there’s something we should tell you,” he said. “I don’t own the ranch, I just run it for the owner, your wife got it mixed up and we didn’t bother to correct her. I’m sorry to have deceived you, but at the time, it seemed like an innocent enough lie.”

Fred started laughing, “Oh, I wish I could tell her, I’d love to see the look on her face,” he said. “But don’t worry, your secret is safe with me. I don’t care what you do for a living or how much money you have as long as you make my daughter happy, and from what I can see, you do.”

Connie didn’t say anything for a second, then looked up at him, “He does, Dad,” she said, smiling at him. “He drives me crazy too, but he makes me happy.”

“Then the rest will come with time,” Fred said, smiling at them. “I’ve spent most of my life regretting the choices I made, don’t be like me, hold to what you have. Don’t let it slip through your fingers, because you might not get another chance at that kind of happiness.”

“No, sir, we won’t,” he said. “Thank you for the advice.”

“You’re welcome, Mitchell,” Fred said. “Now, I want to hear all about the ranch, and your horses, Connie. Aren’t you starting a breeding program?”

After dinner, the three of them made their way to Gracie’s room, and Fred spent a little time getting to know the baby, then they showed him to another room for the night. “I’m sorry about this Dad,” Connie said. “I never meant to come between you and Mom.”

“It was a long-time coming, sweetheart, don’t blame yourself,” Fred said. “Now you’d better go get some sleep. Your mother will be on the warpath tomorrow, looking for any reason she can to break the two of you up. I’ll do what I can, but you know how she is. If we’re lucky I can convince her to leave.”

“Don’t let her take it all out on you,” Mitchell said. “I don’t want you

paying for what we did.”

“I’ll be fine,” Fred said, slapping him on the back. “I’ve been dealing with Marjorie for almost thirty years.”

“Good night, then,” he said. “We’re just a couple of doors down if you need anything.”

“Good night, you two, sleep well,” Fred said, then went into his room and shut the door.

As soon as they were alone, he pulled Connie into his arms, “Are you alright?” he asked. “That couldn’t have been easy for you to watch.”

She looked up at him, an expression on her face that he couldn’t read, “No, I’m not okay,” she said, taking his hand and leading them down the hall to the master bedroom. “But I know what will fix it.”

When the door closed behind them, she pushed him farther into the room, flipped the lock, then turned to face him. “Tonight, wasn’t easy,” she said, closing the distance between them. “I hate to see my father so upset, but it did make one thing clear to me, all this waiting is just wasting precious time. I’ve been running from you because I’m scared, but I’m not scared anymore. I want you Mitchell, make love to me.”

His body responded instantly, his magic flared to life, but he held back, afraid to believe that it was true. “Connie, I want you more than I’ve ever wanted anyone, I need you more than I’ve ever needed anyone,” he said, groaning when she slipped into his arms and rubbed her silk covered body against his. “But this will change everything. There won’t be any going back, not for me, not ever. I’ll want you forever, Connie.”

She looked up at him, her eyes full of desire and so much more, he couldn’t breathe for a second, “Good, because forever sounds pretty good to me,” she said, then stepped back from him, unzipped her dress and let it fall to the floor. “Make me yours Mitchell, claim me now, and don’t ever let me go.”

He growled when he realized that she’d been completely naked under the dress, but fought the urge to pull her into his arms. Instead, he let his eyes roam over her body, taking in every detail until he couldn’t stand it anymore. Reaching for her, he pulled her roughly into his arms, slammed his mouth down on hers, and kissed her until she was squirming in his embrace and pulling at his clothes.

Connie

Connie was desperate to feel Mitchell's naked skin under her hands, but none of the buttons on his shirt would cooperate and she let out a frustrated groan. Sliding her hand down to his pants, she fumbled with his belt buckle, the need deep in the pit of her stomach only growing when it wouldn't come loose. Mitchell released her from the kiss, brought her hands up to his lips, and kissed them with such tenderness that it made her gasp. Her entire body filled with a warmth that left her legs trembling.

When he swept her up in his arms and carried her to the bed, her body began to throb with anticipation, and she lay back to watch as he slowly stripped off his clothes, his eyes locked on hers. The passion between them leaped to life instantly when he lay down next to her and began to stroke her bare skin, slowly working his way from the hollow of her neck down her chest to cup one swollen breast in his hand.

She gasped as pleasure shot through her, then cried out when his mouth came down over her hard nipple while his hand traveled further down her body. When he nudged her legs apart, she opened them willingly, her breath coming in short gasps as he stroked the sensitive skin on the inside of her thighs. His mouth moved over to the other breast and for several long seconds, she was only aware of the pleasure radiating from where his tongue and teeth teased and nipped at her.

But when his finger dipped between her folds and found her sensitive nib, her hips came up off the bed, and she dug her nails into his shoulders as the waves of sensation began to carry her away. With each stroke of his finger, she flew higher, the pleasure overwhelming her until she went tumbling over the edge, her body bucking and trembling with the force of her climax. But only seconds later the driving need for satisfaction was back, and she knew only one thing would fill the empty place inside her.

"Now, Mitchell, please take me now," she cried, spreading her legs wider for him. "I need you inside me, please don't make me wait."

With a low growl that echoed off the walls, his eyes almost glowing in the dim light of the room, Mitchell slipped between her legs and positioned himself at her throbbing opening. When he didn't give her what she wanted, what she desperately needed, she opened her eyes and looked up at him, then lifted her hips to him in a silent invitation.

His eyes never leaving hers, he drove himself into her with one powerful thrust of his hips, "You belong to me now, Connie," he said. "And you will always be mine."

His words opened something inside her, a little corner of her soul she hadn't known was there, and she was suddenly filled with warmth. "Yes, Mitchell, yes," she panted, intense pleasure making it difficult to breathe. "I'm yours forever, until the end of time."

She had no idea where the words came from, but the warmth turned to a tingling feeling, and what she could only describe as pure joy rushed through her. Mitchell growled deep in his throat, filling her repeatedly until she was no longer aware of the world around her, only of the man above her. Their bodies fused together, each stroke of Mitchell's powerful hips driving them both closer toward the brink of ecstasy. She could only hold on as her body blossomed, then finally took them both over the edge.

Mitchell collapsed on top of her and she managed to throw her arms around him, her breath coming in short gasps, her body still trembling as the last waves of pleasure slowly faded away. They lay that way for a long time, neither wanting to move, but Mitchell finally rolled off her, breaking the contact between them and making her gasp at the empty feeling. But he quickly gathered her up in his arms and pulled her up against him, and she sighed as warmth spread through her again.

She looked up at him and smiled, "I feel warm all over. I've never felt anything like this before," she said. "I know that you're doing it, but I'm not sure how."

For a second, she thought she saw a look of uncertainty on Mitchell's face, but it disappeared so quickly she couldn't be sure. "That's just the afterglow from good sex," he said, grinning at her. "You know, the kind you have with someone you really care about."

"I don't think I've ever felt like this before," she said. "It's wonderful and a little scary at the same time."

"Well, I think that's good news for me, since I've never felt this way before either," he said, rolling onto his side. "I mean it, Connie, that was amazing, and I meant every word I said. Nothing is ever going to come between us. I want you with me forever."

"Oh, Mitchell," she said, tears springing to her eyes. "I want that too. I didn't think I'd ever want someone the way I want you, and it's not just sex, there's more, so much more I don't know how to explain it."

"Well, we've got some time to figure it out," he said, grinning down at her. "Our whole lives, in fact."

"Do you really mean that, Mitchell?" she asked. "We agreed to two years,

no strings attached, I don't want.....well, you to change your mind.....”

“Connie, whose idea was it to get married?” he asked, cutting her off.

“It was yours,” she said. “But you said.....”

“Maybe you should forget what I said that night, I might not have been being completely honest,” he said. “I didn't marry you with the intention of letting you go in two years. From the very beginning I was planning on keeping you right here with me, so stop worrying. I want you, Connie, I want your smiles and your kisses, I want your tears and your laughter. I want you in my bed every night for the rest of our lives.”

Connie laughed, her heart soaring with joy, “Okay, I just wanted to make sure we felt the same way,” she said. “Especially the part about being in your bed.”

“Oh, really, is that the part you liked best?” he asked.

She looked up at him, her heart beginning to race, “I'm not sure, it's too soon to tell for sure,” she said. “Maybe we should explore that one a bit more.”

This time when he slipped inside her, she let out a long sigh and closed her eyes, letting the passion take her where it would, her trust in the man she loved so complete that it was easy to give herself to him without reservation.

CHAPTER 21



*** MITCHELL ***

When Mitchell and Connie came down for breakfast the next morning, the baby in Connie's arms, Josie was back in the rocking chair, watching the commotion in the kitchen with an amused smile on her face. Fred was sitting next to her, sipping a cup of coffee, but he set it down and reached for Gracie as soon as he saw her. Connie handed her to her father, and he settled the baby on his lap, then began talking to her.

"Well, don't you look pretty this morning," he said. "Have you had breakfast yet? I bet your starving."

Gracie stared up at him for a moment, then a smile appeared on her face, and she began to wave her hands in the air. "She smiled at me," Fred said, looking up at them with a pleased expression. "I think she likes me."

"Of course, she does," he said. "You're her grandfather."

The smile grew even wider, "I'll give her a bottle if you two want to get some breakfast," he said. "Josie was kind enough to make me something earlier."

Mitchell looked over at Josie, who, to his astonishment, was blushing, "I had just enough time before the horde took over my kitchen again," she said. "But it was my pleasure, Fred."

Connie looked over at him, her eyes wide, "It was a sweet thing to do for an old man like me," Fred said, smiling at Josie, a little twinkle in his eyes. "You'll have to let me repay the kindness by taking you out to lunch."

"Oh.....that would be lovely," Josie said. "But what about your wife?"

"She can worry about her own lunch," Fred said, a frown on his face. "I doubt she'll even miss me. Plus, I've decided that I'm going to file for divorce. I've already made a few phone calls."

“Dad, are you sure?” Connie asked. “That’s a big decision. Maybe you shouldn’t rush into anything.”

“Sweetheart, I’ve been miserable for years,” he said, shaking his head. “Seeing you so happy made me realize that it was past time for me to try a little joy in my life before it’s too late. Don’t blame yourself, this is all your mother’s fault. I guess I let her get away with it for too long.”

“What will you do?” Connie asked, sitting down next to her father. “Mother will tear you apart in the divorce, she’ll take everything and leave you with nothing.”

“Well, not quite nothing. We signed a prenup, you know,” her father said. “I’ll get a modest settlement, and it should be enough to live on for the rest of my life if I’m careful. Prospect seems like a nice little town. I might look around for a little house here. After all, this is where the most important people in my life are.”

“Oh, Dad, that would be wonderful,” Connie said, giving him a hug. “We’d love to have you close by.”

“I can already think of a couple of places that might be perfect,” Mitchell said, relieved that at least one of Connie’s parents was going to support them. “I have a friend who’s a real estate agent, I’ll have her give you a call if you like.”

“That would be wonderful,” Fred said. “But it will take a little while for the dust to settle. I might not be ready to buy for a few months, so I’ll have to find something short term at first.”

“I’m sure we can figure something out,” Connie said. “Maybe.....”

Before she could finish her sentence, Tommy came running in the back door, “There’s a fire up on Deadman’s Ridge,” he said, pausing to take a breath. “It’s headed toward the cattle in the upper pasture, we’ve only got a few hours to get them out of there.”

Mitchell raced over to his computer, jiggled the mouse to wake it up, then logged onto the forest service website, his heart beginning to pound when he saw the map of the fire. “Turn on the television, they’ll be covering the fire,” he shouted over the noise in the kitchen. “Tommy, ring the emergency bell on the porch, then get back to the barn and start saddling horses. The boys at camp are going to need some help.”

Connie came up behind him, “How bad is it?” she asked, looking at the computer over his shoulder. “Oh, Mitchell, we’re right in its path.”

“It’s going to be fine,” he said, turning and pulling her into his arms.

“We’ll just take it one step at a time. We’re not under evacuation yet, there’s still hope it could change direction.”

She took a deep breath, “I’m sorry, I just panicked there for a second,” she said, shaking her head. “I know what to do. We have gone over our fire plan before. I’m going to head to the barn and start packing.”

When she tried to pull out of his arms, he held her there, the thought of her anywhere near the fire making a fierce need to protect her erupt inside him. “Connie, you can’t go,” he said, shaking his head. “It’s too dangerous.”

“Mitchell, it’s my job,” she said. “I have to go.”

“I don’t want you out there, Connie,” he said. “I don’t know what I would do if something happened to you, you have to stay here.”

She looked up into his eyes, “Do you think I’m not afraid that something might happen to you?” she asked. “I’d be an idiot if I weren’t, but I know that it’s your job, and I respect that. You need me out there, Mitchell, I’m not staying behind. I’m going to do my job; I hope we’re not going to fight about this, because we’re just wasting time.”

Connie

Connie was sure that Mitchell was going to argue with her, he had that look on his face, the same one she’d seen countless times over the last few years, but instead, he crushed her up against him. “Every instinct in my body is screaming at me to take you upstairs and lock you behind a very strong door,” he said, shaking his head. “If you come with us, you have to promise that you’ll stay with me. If I can’t see that you’re safe, I’ll spend every second worrying about you.”

“I think that’s a promise I can make,” she said. “Then I’ll know that you’re safe too.”

“You two need to go,” Josie said, walking over with the baby in her arms. “Fred and I will take care of Gracie.”

Mitchell looked uncertain for a second, then gave Josie a hug, “Thank you, I know that you’ll take good care of her,” he said. “I want you to get out of here the second they call for evacuations. Get Gracie someplace safe, and we’ll find you when it’s all over.”

“I’ll make sure nothing happens to them,” her dad said, coming up behind Josie. “I’m going to send Marjorie home, but I’m going to stay and help out any way I can.”

“Thanks, Dad,” Connie said, giving him a hug. “I think we’ll both feel better knowing you and Josie are together.”

“You be careful, sweetheart,” Fred said, looking at Connie, tears in his eyes. “We have a lot of time to make up for.”

“I will, Dad,” Connie said, then gave Gracie a big kiss. “Keep your Aunt Josie and Grandpa Fred safe, sweetheart, and we’ll see you soon.”

Mitchell took Gracie from Josie, “You heard your mother,” he said, looking over at her. “We’ll be back for you as soon as it’s safe.”

When they stepped out of the house, the first thing she noticed was the scent of campfire and a haze in the air, but what made her gasp was the plume of grey smoke rising in the sky to the south. “Oh, Mitchell, it looks bad,” she said. “I didn’t think it was that close.”

“It’s still fifty miles away,” he said. “We’ve got time. You know these trails as well as I do. We’re going to go fast and hard, see if we can meet up with the herds on their way north.”

“I just need to grab my emergency kit, and I’ll be ready to go,” she said. “We should take the trail that leads by the old mill. It’s rough, but we could shave off some time.”

“Good idea,” Mitchell said, striding into the barn. “Your kit is already packed, and Tommy should have loaded the emergency supplies on my horse.”

Tommy was waiting just inside the doors for them, both horses loaded with as much gear as possible, “Did you get everything?” Mitchell asked, swinging up into the saddle when Tommy nodded. “I’m leaving you in charge, Tommy. You’ve handled yourself like a true professional before, but this is a big responsibility, so take a deep breath and calm down.”

“Yes, sir,” Tommy said, his eyes wide. “I’m okay, really, just a bit out of breath.”

“Okay, then, I’m putting you in charge of making sure everyone gets out if they call for an evacuation, and that includes the horses,” Mitchell said. “At the first sign the fire is coming this way, I want you to start moving them. If your gut tells you to go, don’t wait for an official notice, just do it.”

“I won’t let you down,” Tommy said, his chest puffing up a little. “I’ll make sure everyone is safe. You’ve got my word on it.”

Connie handed Mitchell a wet bandana, “Tie that around your nose and mouth,” she said. “It will make it easier to breath when the smoke gets thicker.”

When she was satisfied, they rode out of the barn like a couple of bandits, making her smile, but it wasn't long before the smile disappeared from her face, replaced by one of determination. The fire was growing, the plume of smoke twice as large as it had been when they went into the barn. They were running out of time if they were going to keep the herd safe. They pushed the horses as hard as they dared, the smoke growing thicker as they approached the fire, and she began to worry that the herd had gotten trapped, along with the men who cared for them.

But only a few minutes later, she heard the bellowing of the beasts and the sharp yips and barks of the cattle dogs, "Oh, thank goodness, there they are," she yelled, slowing her horse. "I was beginning to get worried."

"We're not out of the woods yet," Mitchell yelled. "We've got to get them across the river, and they're already freaked out. It's not going to be easy."

"We don't have any choice," she said, noticing the head wrangler waving his hat at them. "There's Miguel, we should go check in with him."

"Welcome to the fun," Miguel hollered when they got close enough. "I could sure use you two over on the left flank, we've got that cliff coming up before we get to the river, and they're a bit spooked by the smoke."

"We're on it," Mitchell called, then looked over at her. "Are you sure that you're up to this? No one would think any less of you if you hung back."

"I can ride as well as you can, Mitchell Stewart," she said, sticking her chin up in the air. "In fact, maybe better; let's go."

Miguel was laughing as they rode off, "Be careful," he called. "I want to see you both on the other side of the river."

For all her boasting, the moving mass of cattle was a bit intimidating at first, but Connie stuck in the saddle and let the horse do the work it had been trained to do, and before long, she was feeling confident enough to relax a little. They still had miles to go until they reached the river, but they were leaving the fire behind, and when she looked off to the east, dark clouds were beginning to pile up on the horizon, a sure sign of rain.

CHAPTER 22



MITCHELL

Mitchell rode behind Connie, keeping one eye on her and the other on the herd, the thunder of hooves drowning out any other sound, making it impossible to warn her that the cliff was coming up. Just as the herd began to change direction, following the curve of the mountainside, the wind shifted and they were suddenly lost in a thick cloud of smoke. Where the smoke mixed with the dust it was impossible to see more than a few feet in front of him, and he began to panic, afraid that the cattle would push Connie off the cliff.

Letting his magic flare, sharpening all his instincts, he pushed his horse forward, keeping as close to the edge of the herd as he could, until he caught sight of Connie trapped just inside the moving mass of flesh. Relief poured through him as they thundered around the sharp curve and past the cliff, but it was short lived when he realized that the river was just beyond the next rise.

Trapped in the herd, all it would take was one misstep by her horse or one of the cattle running alongside them, and Connie would be thrown to the ground. He didn't let himself finish the thought of what would happen to her. Instead, he searched for a way to get her out, but his mind came up empty. Horrified, he could only watch as the river came into view, and it began to dawn on Connie how much trouble she was in.

Pulling up frantically on the reins, she tried to turn the horse, but it started to buck, and she was forced to hang on, making his heart skip a beat. Before she could try again, they were at the river crossing, and the cattle began to slow, confusing Connie's horse. It tried to jump over the animal in front of them, throwing Connie out of the saddle.

Shouting her name, he could only watch as she flew through the air and

landed in the river right in the middle of the stampeding animals. Spurring his horse, he rode into the middle of the herd, desperate to get to Connie, positive that she was going to be trampled. But a second later, she was on her feet, dodging the cattle as they ran past, eyes desperately scanning the herd for a way out, and he kicked his horse again, sure that he was her only hope. His horse bucked and fought him and he was nearly thrown out of the saddle, and it became clear that he wasn't going to be able to get her on horseback, that he had no choice but to use his magic to save the woman he loved. Pushing his way back to the side of the herd, he jumped down from his horse, closed his eyes and let his magic flow, not caring who saw him or what happened afterward.

When the wolf took over, the instinct to protect his mate surged through him even more potently, and he let it guide him. He didn't even stop to think about his own safety. Gathering his powerful muscles, he sprang into the water in front of Connie and let out a growl loud enough to be heard over the noise of the herd. Behind him, he heard Connie scream, but he didn't move, just continued to snarl and snap at the cattle as they rushed by him, forcing them to turn upriver.

His teeth still bared, growls still coming from deep in his chest, he turned and looked back at Connie, who was staring at him with wide eyes, then turned back to the cattle and slowly backed away from them, forcing her to back up with him. When he was sure that Connie was safe, he let his magic fade and popped back into his human form, then took a couple of steps toward her, but stopped when he saw the look on her face.

She shook her head a couple of times, "You're.....it can't be....." she stammered, then her eyes rolled up in her head, her legs gave way, and she sank into the river before he could get to her.

Wading over to her, he scooped her up out of the water, cursing himself for not telling her sooner, carried her over to the bank, and sat down with her in his arms. He rocked back and forth, talking to her under his breath, watching the rise and fall of her chest, until Miguel came riding up. When he saw them, he jumped down from his horse and rushed over, clearly believing the worst.

"Is she....." he asked, but didn't finish the sentence.

"She's alive," he said, his voice cracking. "She got thrown from her horse and trapped in the middle of the herd. I was able to get her out, but I had to shift to do it."

“That’s a big shock for a human if they don’t know,” Miguel said, shaking his head. “You should have told her.”

“I was going to,” he said, looking down at Connie. “I shouldn’t have waited, but I was.....afraid she’d freak out.”

“Looks like your fear came true,” Miguel said, shaking his head. “You’d better take her up to the cave, get her dried off, and see if you can fix this. We can handle the cattle from here.”

“Thanks, Miguel,” he said. “She’s important to me.”

“Yeah, I got that message,” Miguel said. “Good luck, my friend, I think you’re going to need it.”

He rose to his feet, keeping Connie close to his chest, and climbed out of the river, “Will you find our horses and have someone bring them to us?” he asked. “We’re going to need them to get home.”

Miguel looked up at the sky, “There’s a storm coming in, it should knock that fire right out. I give it a couple of hours before it starts raining,” he said. “Go take care of your woman, and I’ll send an update on the fire as soon as I get one.”

Connie

Connie gradually came awake several hours later. She slowly opened her eyes, thinking that there was something she should be afraid of, but unable to recall what it was. When she realized that she was in a cave, she sat up, bracing herself to run away, searching her mind trying to remember why she was there. But her mind was blank, there was nothing there, and her heart began to pound with fear until she saw Mitchell rushing over to her.

“Hey, you’re okay! We’re in a cave a few miles from the river,” he said. “You were wet and cold, so I brought you here to get warm and dry.”

Connie realized for the first time that she was tucked into a sleeping bag, dressed only in her bra and panties. “Where are my clothes?” she asked, a blush creeping across her cheeks. “I think I should get dressed.”

“They’re right over here drying by the fire,” he said. “They’re still a little damp.”

“That’s okay,” she said. “I feel a little weird sitting here half naked.”

As she got dressed, she searched her mind for a memory, any memory that would help her remember how she ended up wet and in a cave.

“Mitchell, what happened?” she asked. “I can’t remember anything.”

A strange look appeared on his face, and for a minute, she thought he looked guilty, "Come over and sit down by the fire again," he said, pouring something into a cup from a pot on the fire. "I made some hot chocolate. It'll help warm you up."

She took the cup from him, surprised that her hands were shaking, took a long sip, then looked over at him. "Mitchell, why can't I remember what happened?" she asked. "And why are you acting like it's something terrible?"

"I'm sorry, Connie, it's not something terrible, at least I don't think it is," he said. "But you got quite a shock after you fell into the river."

"I fell into the river?" she asked, then gasped as it all slowly came back to her. "I remember the herd.....my horse threw me.....I was in the river..... it was so scary, I thought I was going to die.....then.....no, that can't be right.....I did not see a wolf.....I must have been scared....."

Her words died away and she looked over at him, "I'm sorry, Connie, I should have told you sooner," he said. "I should have told you before we....."

"Are you saying what I saw was real?" she asked, feeling a wave of panic wash through her. "I don't believe you. It was just a trick of my eyes, fear or something."

"It's true. I'm what they call a shifter, I can change into a wolf at will," he said. "I know it seems impossible, but it's not. Please try to understand, that wasn't the way I wanted you to find out, but I couldn't think of another way to save you."

Connie jumped to her feet and began backing away from Mitchell, the memory of the fierce creature jumping into the river out of nowhere flashing through her mind. Her heart began to pound when she thought about the sharp white teeth in a snarling mouth, the bellowing of the cattle when the wolf growled, the look in its eyes when it turned to her. Still backing away, her mind spinning, she cried out when Mitchell got to his feet and came toward her, suddenly feeling like she was going to faint again.

"Mitchell, please....." she said, fighting the urge to scream. "I'm scared.....this can't be happening. I must still be asleep."

"I know you're scared, sweetheart, but you don't have anything to fear. I would never hurt you; I could never hurt you," he said, taking a few more steps toward her. "Please just look at me. I'm the same man you knew before, just with a special talent."

She looked up and their eyes met, "Special talent....." she repeated,

feeling calm beginning to settle over her. “I don’t understand.”

Mitchell took a couple more steps toward her, then carefully pulled her into his arms, releasing a burst of warmth that traveled through her, comforting her unlike anything else could. “Connie, I can’t explain what happens when I shift, I don’t think it’s something you can measure or identify, but lots of us call it magic,” he said, stroking her back. “I’m really not that different from other people, I just have a few characteristics of a wolf, and I have total control over it.”

She stood in the circle of his arms for a long time, her brain fighting over what it had seen and what she believed was impossible. With a long sigh, she stepped back from him, feeling like she was losing her mind, not quite ready to accept the reality of what Mitchell was.

“Shift again,” she finally said, knowing it was the only way. “I need to see it again.”

“Connie, are you sure?” he asked, his face full of concern. “I don’t want to scare you again. You were out for a long time the last time; maybe we should wait.”

She shook her head, “No, I need to see it now,” she said. “It’s the only way I’ll know what I saw was real.”

He stepped back, “Just promise me that you’ll remember that it’s me inside the wolf,” he said, then let his magic begin to flow. “And Connie, just so you know, you’re my mate, and a wolf protects his mate until death. I could never hurt you.”

Holding her breath, his words ringing in her head, she watched as the air around Mitchell began to shimmer and only a second later, the man was gone, replaced by the huge predator. She wanted to shrink back, wanted to close her eyes, but she held her ground, forcing herself to look at the creature, stunned when she saw Mitchell’s eyes looking back at her.

The warmth she’d grown accustomed to slowly spread through her again, and when the animal lowered its head, she found herself taking a few steps toward him, a feeling of recognition spreading through her. She held out her hand and the wolf stepped up and licked her fingers, then lowered its head further, and she began to stroke the soft fur on its head. Becoming bolder, she ran her hands over the wolf’s body, marveling at the powerful muscles, her fear and denial slowly turning into awe and fascination.

Mitchell stood perfectly still, letting her explore his body, his muscles trembling when she ran her hands over them, his breathing becoming faster,

then let out a low groan when she stepped away from him. The wonder of what she was experiencing filled her, quickly followed by an almost primal need to feel Mitchell's body deep inside her, and she gasped, then reached out to him again.

CHAPTER 23



*** MITCHELL ***

Mitchell understood Connie's unspoken request, could feel the warmth of their connection spreading through him, overriding the desire that raced through his blood. He shut his magic down, shedding his wolf form. Connie studied him for a second, her eyes filling with desire, then she launched herself at him. Her mouth captured his the instant that he caught her, and the passion between them flared to life. Unable to believe that he was holding her, kissing her, he pulled back and looked at Connie, searching her face for what he hoped to see.

Acceptance shone in her eyes as she returned his gaze, but that wasn't all. There was something else that made his heart soar with joy, and the animal inside him began to demand that he take what was his. Holding himself back, waiting for Connie to make the next move, he stood with her in his arms, the connection between them warming them both.

"I'm sorry I was afraid," Connie said, stroking his face. "I didn't understand at first, I couldn't accept that something so amazing could be real, but it is, you are....."

Her words trailed off and she kissed him again, then pulled back, "The warmth I feel, it's you, it's your magic," she said. "It's.....I don't know..... energizing, it's comforting.....it's exhilarating.....I need to be closer to you, Mitchell, I need to feel you filling up every part of me. Make love to me, I want to know the beast inside you just like I know the man."

He let his magic flow just enough for it to fill them both with its power, then lowered his mouth down on Connie's, desperate to taste her, to touch her, to feel her trembling beneath him as he drove himself into her. Carrying her over to the sleeping bag by the fire, his mouth never leaving hers, the

feeling of her body pressed against his making him even more desperate, his only thought of taking her, he forced himself to slow down.

Setting her on her feet, he pulled her tee-shirt over her head, leaving her standing in only her bra and panties, the firelight making her skin glow, and another surge of desire nearly made him lose control. After quickly stripping off his clothes, he reached for her, his body throbbing so hard it was almost painful, the need to take her testing his limits. Pulling her into his arms, he stripped off the bra, then sucked first one, then the other swollen nipple into his mouth, making Connie gasp and her legs begin to wobble.

When he was sure she was ready for him, he tore off her panties and started to push her down onto the sleeping bag, but she shook her head. When she dropped to her knees, reached out and took his swollen manhood into her hands, his legs buckled as pleasure shot through him. Threading his fingers into Connie's thick curly hair, he braced himself for what he knew was coming next, but he wasn't prepared for the rush of sensation that rocketed through him when her mouth closed over him.

Moaning deep in his throat, he held on as long as he could, wanting the intense feelings to last as long as possible, but when he felt himself soaring too high, he pushed Connie away with a growl. She tumbled onto her back and looked up at him with a pleased smile on her face, then her eyes locked on his, spread her legs and gestured for him to join her. Dropping to his knees, he crawled between her legs, ignoring the demands of his body, spread Connie's legs farther, then dropped his head between them and ran his tongue over her swollen nib.

Her hips came up to meet him, her cries of pleasure filled the cave as he lapped at her, and she threaded her hands into his hair and held on, until, her breath coming in short gasps, Connie tumbled over the edge. She called his name over and over as the pleasure ripped through her, and it surged into him through their connection, pushing him beyond his limits, unleashing the animal inside him.

Grabbing her by the hips, he lifted her onto her hands and knees, then slipped between her legs, nudged them open with his knees, and slid himself into her. Connie's body welcomed him, her passageway slick and hot, her body stretching and expanding to take him even deeper as her muscles clenched around him tightly. He drew back, making her whimper, then with a powerful thrust of his hips buried himself deeply inside her again, ground his hips against her until she was pushing back against him, her breath coming in

short gasps.

He let go then, let the passion and need drive him until he was only aware of the pleasure as they spiraled higher and higher together, then Connie tumbled over the edge and took him with her. Calling her name, he emptied himself inside her, driving himself deeper as his body trembled with the force of his pleasure, Connie's answering cries only making the sensations more intense. When he finally began to come back to himself, he collapsed onto his side and pulled Connie up against his body, not ready to break the connection between them.

She let out a huge sigh and snuggled back against him, "I just want to warn you that I have about a million questions," she said. "And you're going to answer every one of them."

"As long as you let me do that to you again," he said, nuzzling her neck. "I'll answer any questions you have."

"Mitchell, I'm serious, this is important," she said, turning in his arms to look up at him. "There's stuff I need to know."

"What stuff?" he asked, running his fingers up and down her arm. "There are some things I can't explain, it just happens."

She pulled away from him and rolled over on her back, "What about kids?" she asked. "Will our kids be shifters?"

"Is there something you need to tell me?" he teased. "I thought you weren't sure if you ever wanted kids."

"Things change," she said, shrugging her shoulders but there was a little smile on her face. "I wouldn't mind having your babies."

"Oh, really," he said, grinning at her. "I'm honored, and I think we should work on that right now."

"Mitchell, I didn't mean right now," she said, but he was already slipping between her legs. "But then again, practice makes perfect."

Connie

Connie followed Mitchell down the trail that led back to the river, marveling at how different one day could be from the next. Unlike the day before, the sky was crystal blue and the air was crisp and fresh from the rain. It wasn't long before they heard the cattle in the meadow by the river, but unlike their unhappy noise of the day before, it was clear they were in no distress. They spotted Miguel before he saw them and made their way over to

the temporary camp, relieved to see their horses grazing with the others in an improvised paddock.

“Well, good morning,” Miguel said, smiling at them. “I’m glad to see you two together. I assume you worked everything out.”

Connie looked over at Mitchell, “It’s okay, he’s one of us,” he said. “I’ve known Miguel for most of my life.”

It took her a second, then she understood what he meant, “You mean, you’re a.....shifter too,” she said, then looked around. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have said that so loud.”

“That’s okay. It takes a little getting used to,” Miguel said. “You’re taking it better than I thought you would.”

She looked over at Mitchell again, “I’m getting there,” she said, taking his hand. “You all will just have to be patient with me.”

After a quick breakfast with Miguel and the other hands, they set off for home. Both were anxious to get there and ensure everyone was okay. The ride home took longer than she would have liked, but the house finally came into view and by unspoken agreement, they bypassed the barn. It was oddly quiet when they dismounted, and Mitchell took the steps two at a time, a worried look on his face that mirrored her own.

When he pushed open the door, she was right behind him and saw at once that Josie was sitting in the rocking chair, a tissue pressed to her face, her shoulders rising and falling. Her father was sitting next to her, whispering softly to her, his face filled with concern and anger, but he jumped to his feet when he saw them and rushed over to them.

Josie was right behind him, “We tried to stop them, but they had the sheriff,” she said, her shoulder drooping. “I’m so sorry, Mitchell, I said I would keep her safe, but there wasn’t anything I could do.....they just took her.”

Connie felt like her heart had stopped beating, and Mitchell was staring at Josie helplessly, “Who took her?” she asked, rushing over to Josie and putting her arms around her. “Who took Gracie?”

“A woman named Ophelia something or the other,” her father said. “She said that she was from Social Services, that they were removing Gracie from your care because you’re not a suitable parent. The sheriff was with them, and when I tried to argue with them, the man shoved this in my face and threatened to have me arrested.”

Mitchell staggered back a couple of steps, and she shoved Josie into her

father's arms and went to him. "It's okay, Mitchell, we'll get her back," she said, anger making it difficult to think. "We'll call Penelope, that's what we'll do. She'll handle this. You haven't done anything to get Gracie taken away."

Just then Penelope came bursting into the back door, "What the hell is going on?" she demanded. "Where is that paperwork they gave you? I want to see it."

"We already called her," Josie said, then began to sob in Connie's father's arms. "This is terrible, it's all my fault. We should have left."

Penelope marched across the kitchen and stood in front of Josie, "Pull it together, woman," she said. "We need coffee and sugar and lots of it. We're going to fight this, and that woman is going to be sorry she ever crossed me."

Josie looked up at Penelope, her face full of shock, then she took a deep breath and straightened her shoulders, "You're right, we're going to fight," she said. "I'm sorry, I needed you to remind me. I'll get the coffee, and I'm sure I have some blueberry muffins around here. This certainly calls for them."

"Okay, let me see this complaint they filed," Penelope said, taking it from Fred and going over to the table. "Just give me a few minutes....."

A look she didn't like appeared on her new friend's face, "I don't believe this.....of all the ridiculous.....I can't believe a judge would....." she stammered, then let out a huff of annoyance and threw the papers down on the table. "You're being accused of sexual harassment and a few other things. Clarissa claims you threatened to fire her if she didn't have a sexual relationship with her."

"You and I both know that's a bunch of bull," Mitchell said, sinking down into a chair. "She was the one sexually harassing me. I did everything I could to put a stop to it, and then she turned nasty and stopped doing her job. I had no choice but to fire her."

"So, we're basically talking about your word against hers," Penelope said, shaking her head. "That usually doesn't go well for the man. I don't suppose there's any way to prove that you're telling the truth and she's lying."

Mitchell's face fell, and he put his head in his hands, "We were here alone," he said, then picked his head up. "I'm so stupid, how could I forget.....I can prove it was her and not me being the aggressor."

CHAPTER 24



*** MITCHELL ***

Mitchell jumped up from the table and crossed the room to his computer, “I read so much stuff when Gracie first got here,” he said, sitting down. “Some of it was good advice, some of it was crap, but there was one thing that stuck with me.”

He punched a few buttons on the keyboard, then rolled his chair back with the image popped up on the screen, “Come see for yourself,” he said, grinning. “They call it a daddy cam, and it’s used for just this purpose.”

The others gathered around the computer and watched the grainy video. They listened as he and Clarissa had their first interview, “Well, I’ll be..... you’re brilliant,” Penelope said. “I assume you have footage of the entire time she worked here.”

“Every minute of every day,” he said, grinning. “Just give me a date and time, and I’ll pull it up for you with a few clicks of the mouse.”

“Do that and download it to your phone or a zip drive. I’m calling Judge McIntyre right now. He’s going to want to see those videos,” Penelope said, then paused, a look of concern on her face. “Mitchell, unless you had her permission to record, we might not be able to use them.”

“I had her permission,” he said, grinning again. “Another good piece of advice I got online, I put it into her contract. She gave it when she signed it.”

“Then we’ll need that too,” Penelope said. “And there’s no time to waste. It’s Thursday, and the judge always goes golfing in the afternoon. I’ve never known him to cancel for any reason.”

Mitchell was shaking from both fear and anger as they hurried down the long hallway at the courthouse, “We can’t let them take Gracie,” he said. “I’ll kill them before I let them give her away to another family.”

“It won’t come to that,” Connie said, squeezing his hand. “Try to calm down. The judge will see the video and know that they’re lying. After that Penelope is going to tear into them, and I promise you it won’t be pretty.”

The judge’s chambers were crowded when they walked in. Ophelia and the sheriff were sitting in one corner, the baby between them, and Clarissa was sitting next to them, a pleased smile on her face.

When he saw his daughter, he rushed over to her, “Is she okay?” he asked, trying to get closer. “You better not have hurt her.”

“She is no longer your concern, you animal,” Ophelia said. “I told you I would take this child from you, but you wouldn’t listen. Now everyone is going to find out what a monster you are.”

Judge McIntyre looked over at the woman, “Now, Ophelia, you assured me this was in the child’s best interest. That sounds awfully personal,” he said. “I agreed to have the child removed because of the accusations against her father, but I’m becoming a bit concerned.”

“Let’s talk about those completely false accusations,” Penelope said, setting a zip drive on the judge’s desk. “Your honor, if you could just watch this video, I think it will clear everything up.”

After the judge had watched the video several times, he turned to Ophelia, “It appears that there is some confusion,” he said, looking over at Clarissa. “It appears to me that you were the one trying to instigate a sexual relationship with Mr. Stewart, and I have to tell you, young lady, I find your behavior appalling. I’m going to order the immediate return of Gracie to her father, and I’d like to have a little chat with your supervisor, Ophelia. As for you, Clarissa, I’m going to let the sheriff decide how to handle this, but if it was me, I’d charge you with filing a false report. Now if you’ll all excuse me, I have a golf game to get to.”

Relief poured through his body and he rushed over to Gracie, shoved Ophelia out of the way, and picked his daughter up. “Hey, there, sweetheart, are you ready to go home,” he said, tears in his eyes. “Your mom and I have missed you.”

Connie

Connie walked over and put her arms around her husband and daughter, smiling through her tears at the baby, who was gurgling happily and waving her arms in the air. “I think she missed us,” she said. “I know I missed her,

and I was so scared they were going to take her, I feel like I've just run a marathon."

Mitchell looked down at her, "Me too. It's only been a few weeks, but I can't imagine my life without her, without both of you," he said, putting his arm around her. "I love you, Connie, I've loved you since the first second I saw you, and that love is never going to fade."

"I love you too, Mitchell," she said, tears running down her cheeks now. "I loved you when you were fighting me about anything and everything, I loved you when you were vulnerable after Gracie came, I loved you when you jumped into that river to save me, and I'm going to love you for the rest of my life."

"I'm not sure that's long enough for me, but it's a good place to start," he said. "Now, let's go home."

"I just have one question," she said. "Your place or mine?"

"How about we pick one and call it ours," he said. "I'm ready to start our life together, Connie. I'm ready to see what adventures the future holds for us."

EPILOGUE



Jessie shifted on the hard plastic chair, his annoyance with his brother growing by the second, but it was his own fault. He should have known better than to think he would be where he said he would be. It had happened so many times he'd lost count, and he knew what his brother would say if he complained, that he was a doctor, emergencies happened, it was just the way it was.

He pulled out his phone to send his brother a message, but before he could open the screen, Mitchell Stewart collapsed into the chair next to him, his face completely white. "Hey, are you okay?" he asked. "You look like you just got some bad news."

Mitchell looked over at him, "Oh, hey, Jessie," he said, shaking his head. "It's not bad news. I guess you could say it's the best news, but I'm just in a bit of shock."

"You just got married, didn't you?" he asked, amused, remembering the moment he'd found out he was going to be a father. "That news wouldn't have been about a happy little addition to the family, would it?"

"How did you know?" Mitchell asked. "I don't think I've even processed it myself. Connie and I have only been married a couple of weeks, and Gracie is only four months old....."

"It's written all over your face," he said, laughing. "Congratulations, it sounds like you're going to have your hands full. I sure hope it's not twins."

"Oh my God, I didn't think of that," Mitchell said, jumping to his feet. "I'd better get back in there."

When he was gone, Jessie got to his feet, tired of waiting in the hard chair, and walked down the hallway to his brother's office. He pushed open

the door, then froze when he saw who was sitting behind the desk. Years of his life suddenly melted away, and he was nineteen again, looking at the woman of his dreams, the woman he wanted to spend the rest of his life with.

“Hi, Jessie,” Bonnie said, her voice shaking. “I was going to call you when I got into town, but your brother.....”

It took him a second to absorb what was happening, to notice that Bonnie was dressed in scrubs, to see the hospital badge hanging around her neck. “You’re working here,” he finally managed to say. “You’re working for my brother.”

Bonnie nodded, “I’m sorry, Jessie, I didn’t think it would upset you so much,” she said, getting to her feet. “I wanted to come home, well.....it was time to come home, and your brother needed a nurse. I couldn’t pass up the job.”

“This can’t be happening,” he said, shaking his head, then headed for the door like a coward. “I have to go.”

“Jessie, wait, I’m sorry,” Bonnie called after him, but he didn’t wait to see what she was sorry for.

I hope you enjoyed the book! Want to read more of this series? **CLICK HERE** to get book 2 “**Daddy Wolf’s Second Chance**”.